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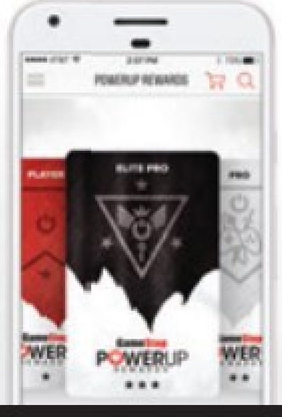

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Well That Was A Year....

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com

Read my column or comment on this letter at gameinformer.com/mag or follow @GI_AndyMc

When I look back at 2017, I can't help but be simultaneously flooded with memories of fond moments and massive disappointments. The most interesting thing to me is, depending on your point of view and your taste in games, those two lists could be drastically different.

Certainly, some games rise above all and reach universal acclaim, but most games have a balance of fans and detractors. Even our game of the year, which I won't spoil here, had its fair share of players who didn't see the same magic that absolutely floored others.

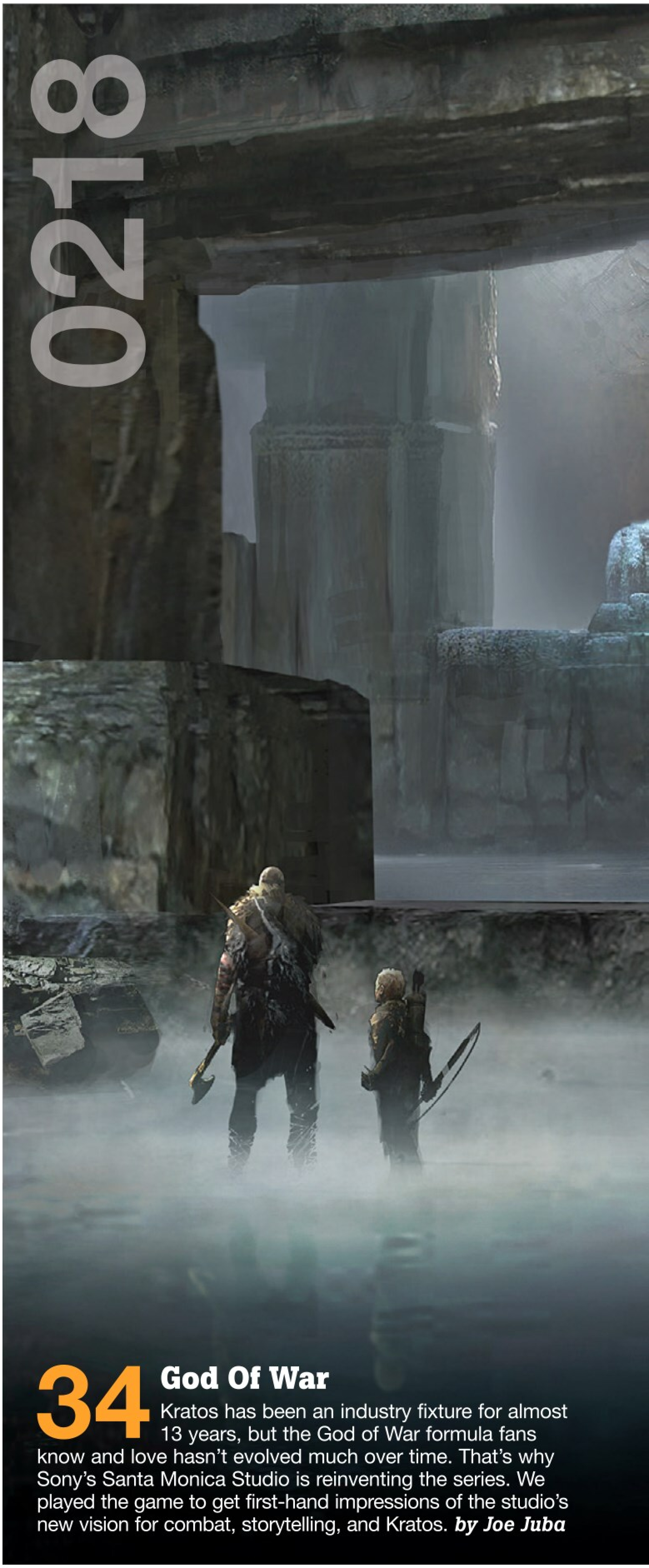
That's what makes 2017 one of the most diverse years in games, and also solidifies in my mind what I love about our Top 50. I think there is a desire deep within human nature to always find a "winner," and yes, we have singular rewards. But I find the Top 50 so much more interesting, as I feel each gamer must find their own games and name their own winners.

The Top 50 isn't as flashy (publishers generally don't put the logo on their list of accolades), but I think showing the accomplishments of titles across the spectrum does more to prove the power of games. Music isn't just pop, hip-hop, and rock, and anyone who listens to just one style isn't finding the deeper meaning in that entertainment. Similarly, games are more than just first-person shooters, RPGs, and platformers. The games industry and we as gamers are a sum of our parts, our interests, and the spectrum of games that make us tick as individuals.

2017 was a hell of a year, and I hope the Top 50 helps you find a gem you may have missed, or reminds you of a story that had an impact on our industry and the people who play video games.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,



34 God Of War

Kratos has been an industry fixture for almost 13 years, but the God of War formula fans know and love hasn't evolved much over time. That's why Sony's Santa Monica Studio is reinventing the series. We played the game to get first-hand impressions of the studio's new vision for combat, storytelling, and Kratos. ***by Joe Juba***

12 Overwatch League

Overwatch has quickly become one of the biggest online shooters ever, and in the coming months it is tackling esports in a big way. We spoke with those involved to find out what to expect.

22 The Inside Story Of Private Division

What do Assassin's Creed, Halo, and Fallout have in common? Their original creators are all making games for this new Take-Two publishing label.

20 Top Ten Board Games of 2017

This was a banner year for board games. Here are our favorites of the year.

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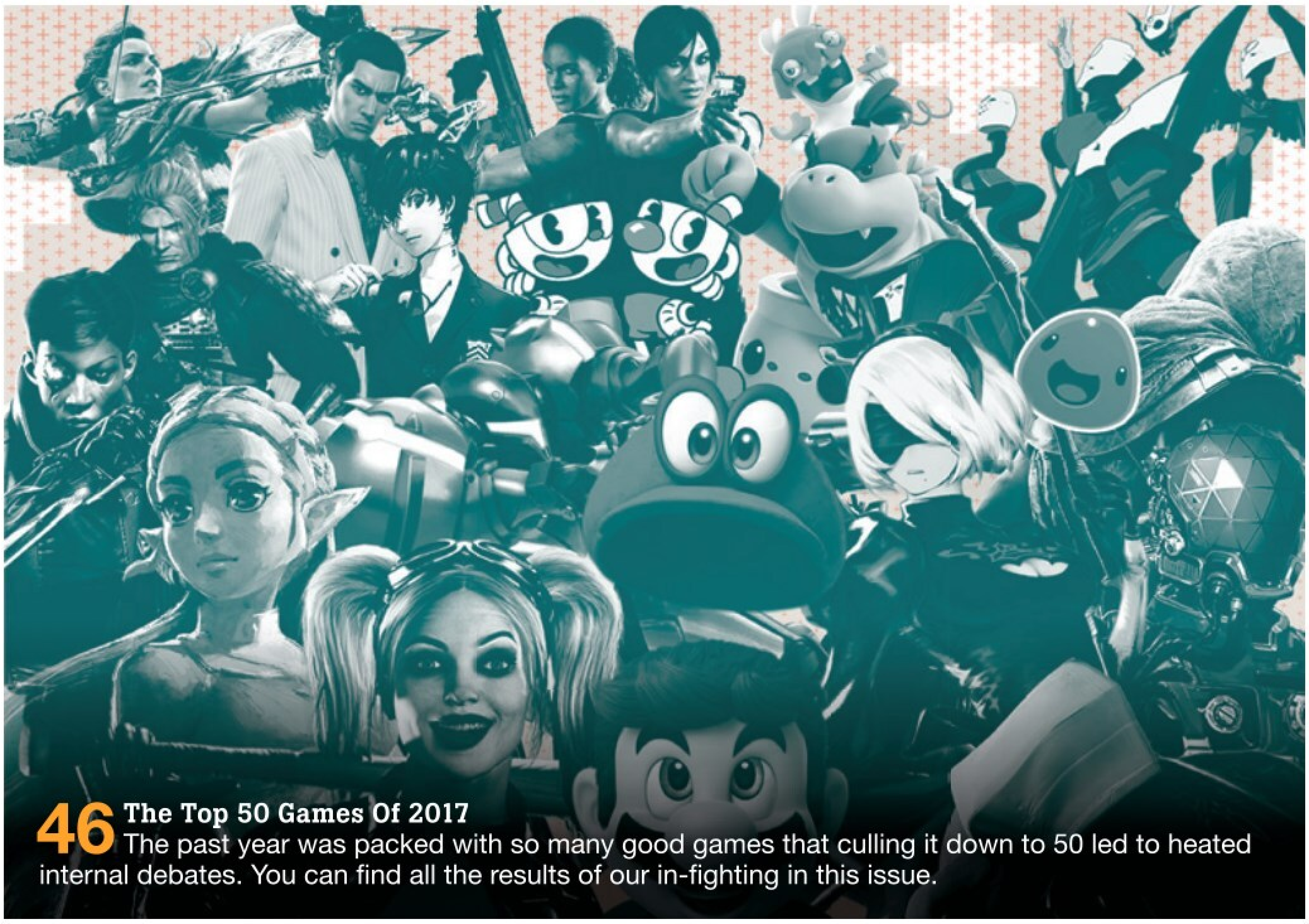
What better way to celebrate the best games of the year than with gear that relates to them?

28 Interview: Eiji Aonuma

The man in charge of Zelda tells us about his history with the legend and video games.



46 The Top 50 Games Of 2017

The past year was packed with so many good games that culling it down to 50 led to heated internal debates. You can find all the results of our in-fighting in this issue.

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The creators of LittleBigPlanet have been quiet about Dreams, but we learned lots of new details at PSX.

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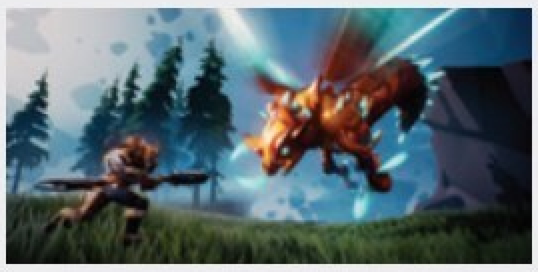
Far Cry 5 was recently delayed, but we have new hands-on to help with the wait.



80 Dauntless

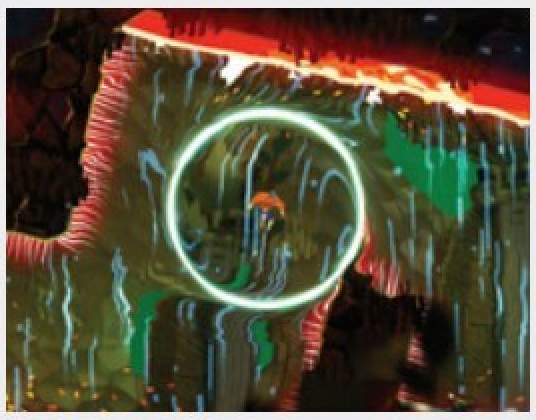
We spoke with the folks behind the Monster Hunter-inspired Dauntless about what's in store for the future.

81 Death Stranding

We don't claim to know what Death Stranding is about, but we are absolutely intrigued.

83 Valkyria Chronicles 4

We feared the franchise was dead, so we're ecstatic to see that it isn't.



86 Guacamelee 2

The lucha libre platformer is getting a sequel.

89 Destiny: Curse Of Osiris

We share our thoughts on Destiny 2's first expansion.

92 PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds

We've been playing it for months, but upon its official release, we're ready to assign it a review score.

91 Steep: Road To The Olympics

Ubisoft returns to its ambitious snow-sports game of 2016 with a new expansion.

93 Xenoblade Chronicles 2

How is the Switch's final hurrah of 2017?

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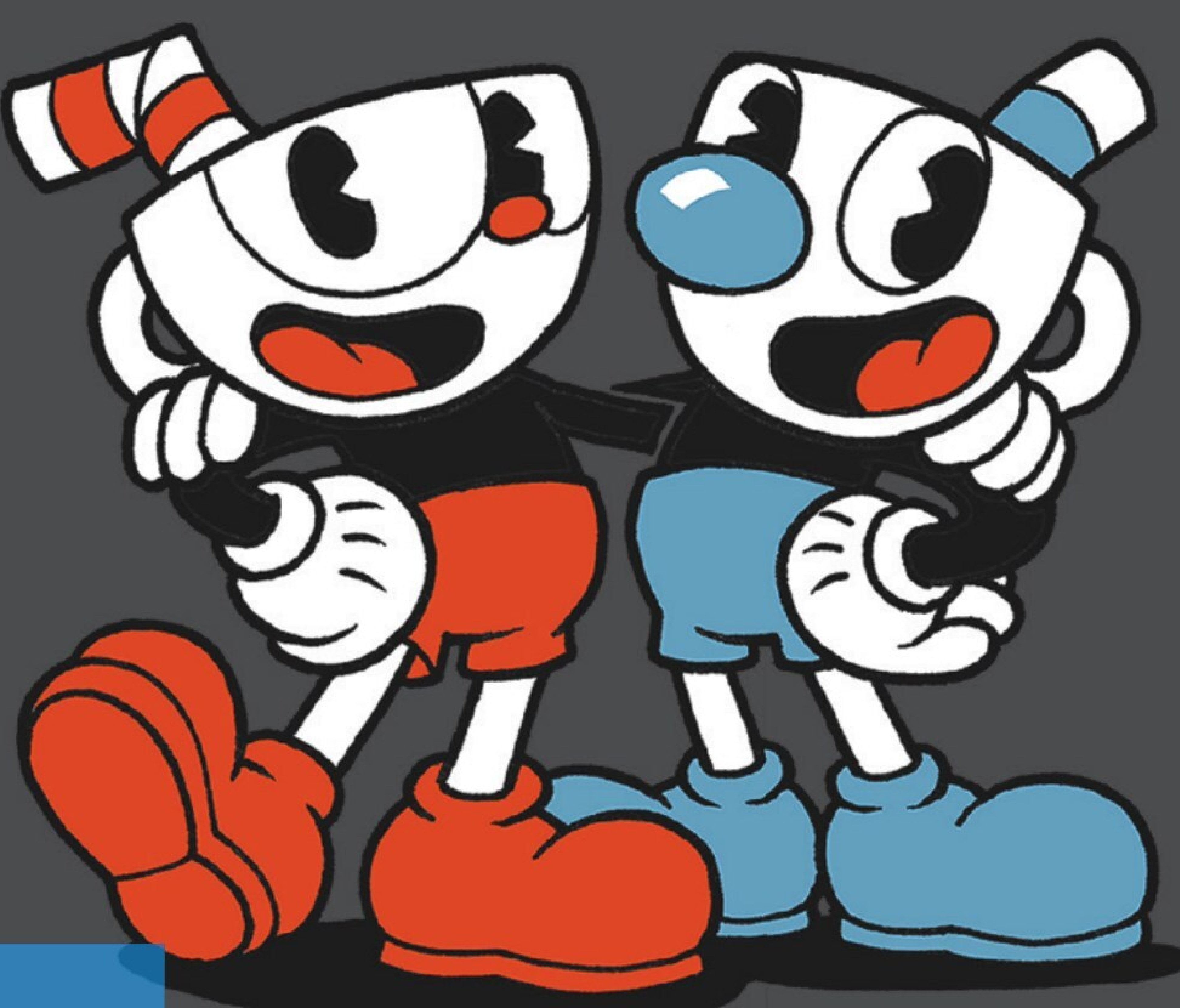
feedback



Emotions ran high this month, with readers praising some recent games, cursing others, and asking pointed questions about new consoles. Also, everyone apparently loves a good monster.

Too Hard For Its Own Good?

I don't know if you heard, but Cuphead has sold over one million copies since its release. My friend has been playing the game and posting videos of her progress on YouTube. In fact, there are Let's Play videos of Cuphead all over YouTube. Seeing how intense the boss battles and run-and-gun levels can get, I'm wondering if Cuphead is best enjoyed vicariously through these kinds of videos instead of actually playing it?

William Crowe
via email

Cuphead seriously needs a mode for new gamers. If someone who is new to gaming starts Cuphead for the first time and realizes how hard it is, they'll do one of two things: Either they'll think they're terrible at gaming and stop playing, or they'll push on and eventually beat a boss, and then deem that they spent way too much time doing it and not want to continue the next time they fight another really hard boss. That's why the game should have an easy mode for newcomers to the hobby.

Sebastian M.
via email

Cuphead's hand-drawn visuals are about as universally appealing as it gets, but the gameplay is an entirely different story. Simply put, Cuphead's extreme difficulty will make it unplayable for some gamers – and even veterans may walk away frustrated with how long it takes to learn and overcome a 90-second boss fight. Cuphead's simple mode, which cuts out segments from boss fights wholesale, isn't a satisfying solution either. Cuphead still safely earned its spot on our Top 50 list – we just wish more people could enjoy playing it.

Treasuring Taro

Your interview with Yoko Taro (Man Behind The Mask, issue 296) was the most enjoyable interview I've read in some time. It gave me a good understanding of his personal process, ambitions, self-doubt, and achievements, and he seems like a genuine and humble person. His storytelling and character development in Nier: Automata is the best I've experienced in a long time. My passion for video games has been faltering lately; I'm a father, a husband, a USAF vet, and a full-time student, so I don't have a lot of time to play games anymore. However, Nier: Automata has made me feel like I'm 14 again and reinvigorated my passion for gaming. So thanks to Mr. Taro and Platinum Games for crafting such a fantastic piece of artwork. We could use more writers and storytellers like them.

Niles Long
via email

Yoko Taro certainly provided us with a lively interview, and you can check out the unabridged version at gameinformer.com. As for Nier: Automata, you might just see it pop up a couple of times in this month's Top 50 feature. Suffice it to say, we dig it too.

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

Fool Me Once...

I was one of the countless gamers who pre-ordered Battlefront. After getting home and installing it, I quickly discovered there was no story campaign or very much content at all; it was a mixture of co-op and multiplayer that was worth maybe 10 dollars. I, along with many others, felt taken advantage of by a company exploiting the Star Wars logo. Now Battlefront II has a story mode, but I will not be buying it; I won't risk being ripped off again. Maybe EA should have given us a real game to start with.

Mike Baker
via email

Normally we would argue against dismissing a series based on one game. Developers often learn from their past mistakes and go on to make better sequels, and blindly writing them off based on the sins of the first entry only robs you from future, fun experiences. In the case of Battlefront II, however, we don't blame you – not only did the story campaign end up falling flat, but the microtransactions included at launch were deemed so predatory that EA was forced to pull them after a concerned call from Disney. Maybe EA can clean up the mess with future patches, but your concern about being ripped off has thus far rang true.

Mid-gen Musings

I've been reading up on the Xbox One X and I wonder if history is repeating itself. In the early '90s, Sega had groundbreaking technology. Remember Sega CD and the 32X? They were essentially "mid-gen refreshes" of the Sega Genesis. But these technological advancements failed against an under-powered Super Nintendo. I wonder if the Xbox One X is the modern-day equivalent of Sega's stumbles?

Fredrick Anderson
San Diego, CA

Thank you for your coverage of the Xbox One X; it's given me a good sense of what the new system brings to the table. However, I do still have some questions for Microsoft: Why didn't we get this system when we purchased the original Xbox One? Why should I pay for a whole new system with the same catalog as the current-gen consoles, and virtually no unique first-party titles? Slightly better graphics if I have the right TV? No doubt hardware is important, but this industry is still about the games – just look at Nintendo. These mid-gen consoles are destructive to the very economy they rely on.

Jason Payne
via email

Few Feedback topics have garnered more consistent reactions from readers than Microsoft and Sony's mid-gen consoles – and they ain't happy. Complaints aside, the Xbox One X is undoubtedly the most powerful console on the market now, but can it amass a big enough install base to overtake PS4? Will increased 4K adoption help Microsoft make its case to gamers? Will the added horsepower make it the lead platform for developers going forward? We don't actually have answers to any of these questions, mind you, but it will be fascinating to see how it all plays out in the coming years.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Will there ever be a Dead Space 4?"

Not the one you probably would want to play.

"With everything going digital, do you fear people won't want to read a physical issue of G.I.?"

As long as digital toilets aren't a thing, we're not worried.

"What's wrong with you people?"

The verdict is still out.

Question Of The Month:

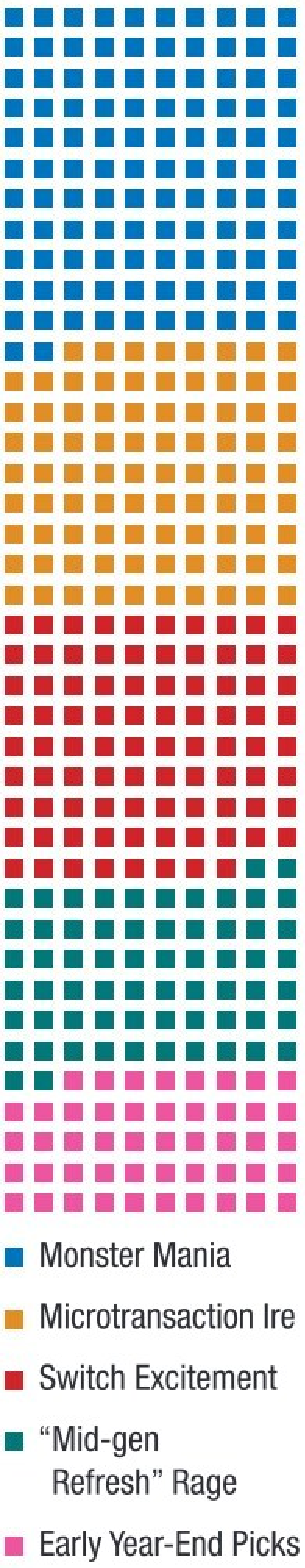
What was your favorite game of 2017 and why?

gi spy

(Left) Sony Santa Monica's Cory Barlog gave Joe and Ben Hanson the full scoop on Kratos' latest god-killing adventure. It got intense. **(Right)** This month during PSX, Andy caught up with Squanch Games' Tanya Jessen and Crows Crows Crows founder William Pugh.

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

On Your Mind



King Of Monsters?

In issue 296, we asked readers what their favorite in-game monster is. The responses read like the V.I.P. list at a Monster Mash…or something. Here's some of them.

My all-time favorite video game monster would have to be Gergoth from Castlevania. Grotesque design, tough-as-nails boss fight, rockin' theme music... Honestly, what more could you ask for? It also helps that he shoots lasers from his mouth and his chest – props to any monster who has two designated laser-orifices.

Noah Mamet

I'd have to say my favorite is any kind of scaly, reptile-like monster. Very classic, and you come across their kind in nearly every game.

Nick Woodworth

My favorite video game monster is the titular Darkness that takes over Jackie Estacado. It's a great and underrated series, and Mike Patton did an amazing job adding some great atmosphere when he voiced The Darkness itself.

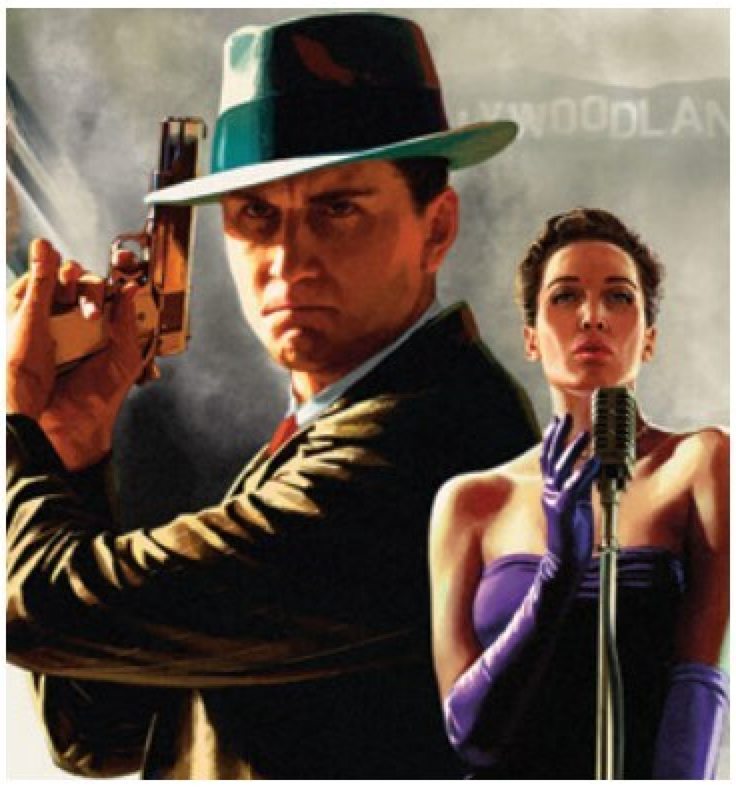
Mike Lodato

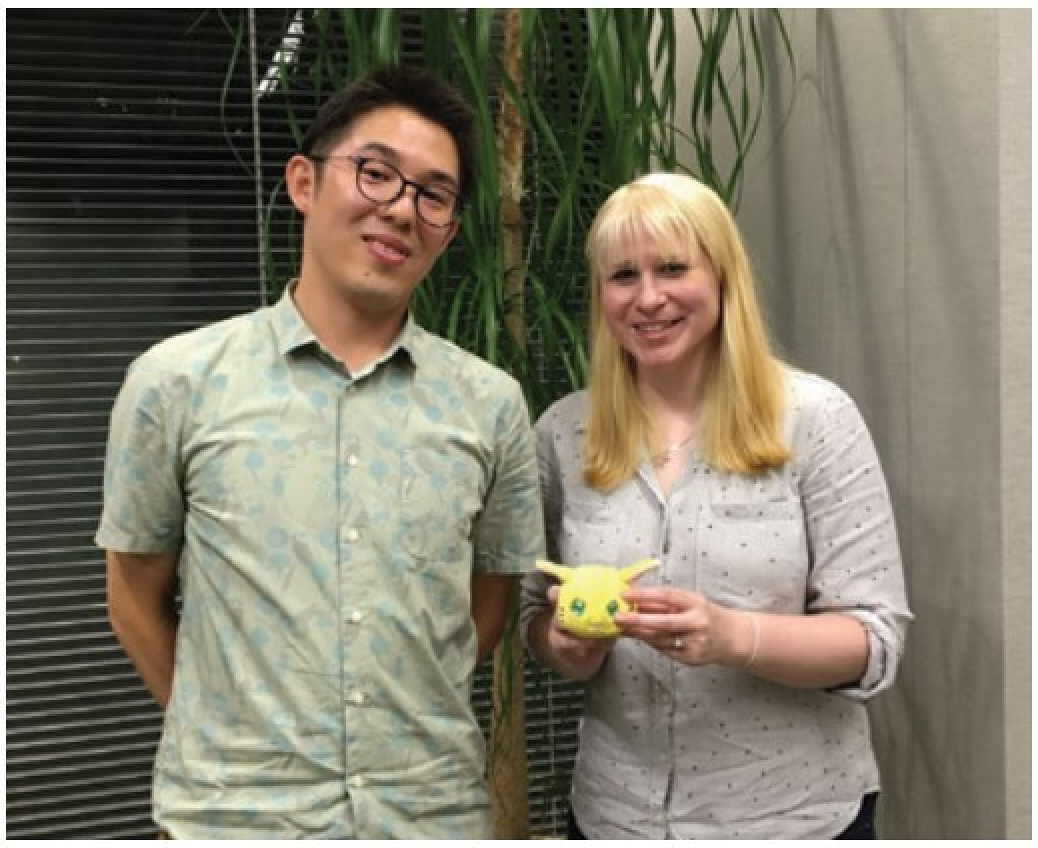
Cased Closed

I was looking forward to the new release of L.A. Noire so much that I downloaded it on launch day. At first I was confused that the storyline was exactly the same as the Xbox 360 game that released back in 2011. I kept on playing thinking it would change, but it never did. Afterwards I researched it online only to find out that it is the exact same game with a few new cut scenes and graphic updates that you probably won't notice unless you have an Xbox One X. So instead of making the Xbox 360 version backwards compatible, they rereleased it and made me think I was getting a great new game for $35. Instead I got a repeat of a game that I already own. I requested a refund from Rockstar but I doubt I will ever get it. What a rip-off.

Jim Johnson
Jacksonville, FL

Out of all the HD remasters that have been released over the past few years, this is the first time we've heard from a reader mistaking one for a brand-new sequel. To be fair to Jim, L.A. Noire's new box art doesn't explicitly label it as a remaster. To be fair to Rockstar, however, it does feature the same name, character art, and story description. A somewhat understandable mistake, but still a bit embarrassing for a would-be gumshoe.





(Left) Amy McNamara fit right in with What's Good Games' Andrea Rene, Kristine Steimer, Brittney Brombacher, and Alexa Ray Corriea (front). **(Right)** Kim had plenty of nerdy details to discuss with Secret of Mana remaster producer Masaru Oyamada.

(continued on page 10)

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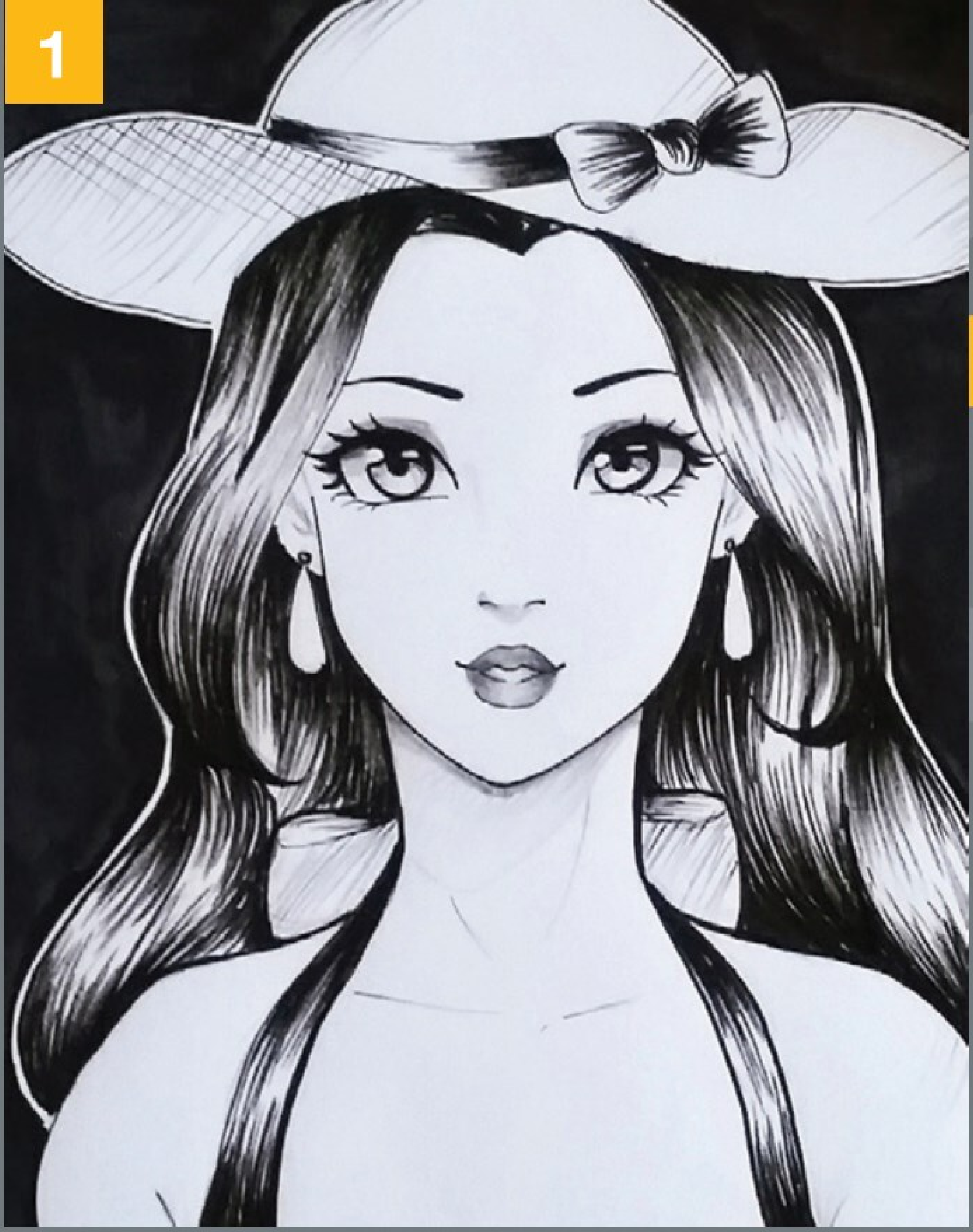


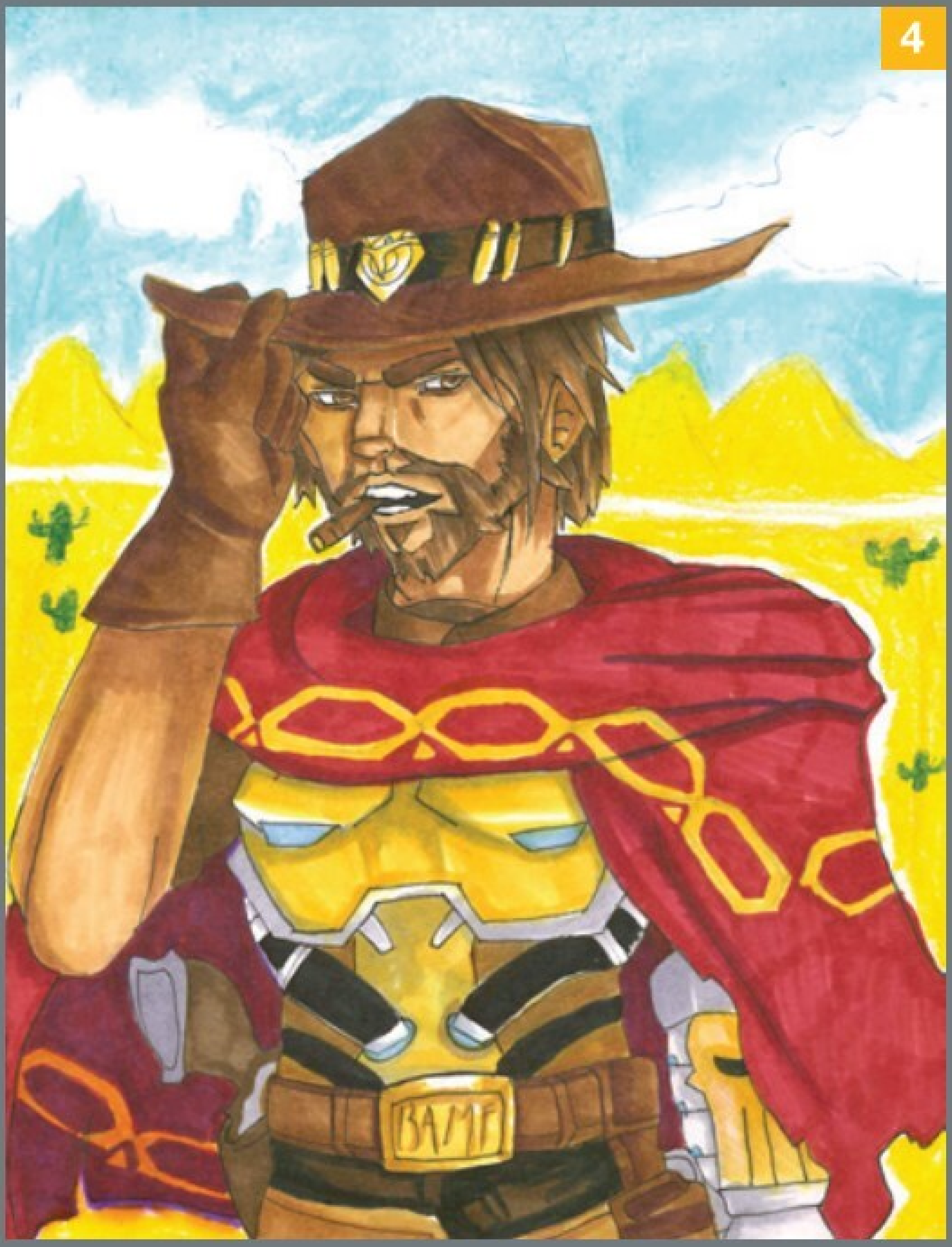
WINNER

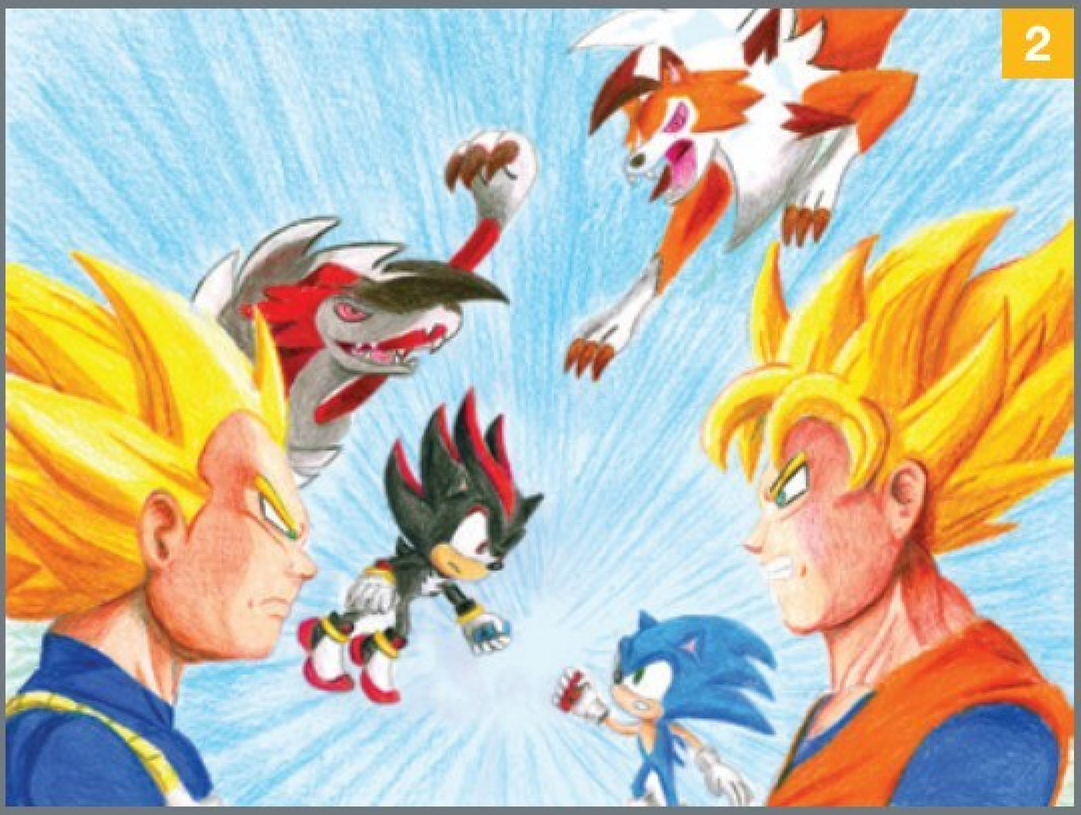
1 Mariana
Princess Peach ain't got nothing on Pauline. Not only is she a democratically elected leader, she can belt out a tune too!

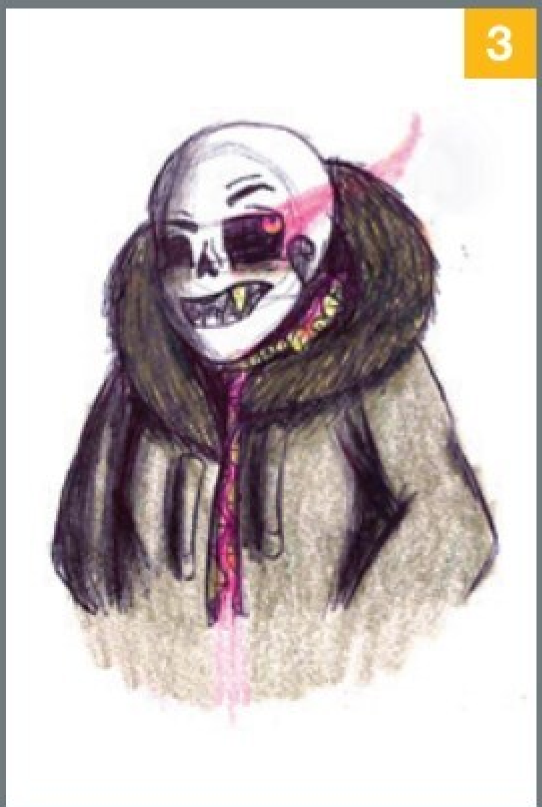
2 Cristian Santiago
You couldn't pick a more colorful group of characters for an IP-bending mash-up.

3 Emilie Bruneau
The more realistic Sans gets, the creepier he becomes.

4 Amaiya Cortez
Hopefully our talented 12-year-old artist doesn't know what McCree's "BAMF" belt buckle stands for…







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(Left) During his recent trip to Japan, Ben Reeves enjoyed a cordial visit with Platinum Games co-founder Atsushi Inaba. **(Right)** Dangen's Nayan Ramachandran, Ben Judd, and Dan Luffey were a little more freewheeling.

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ROOTING THE

NOTABLES

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FOR HOME TEAM

Blizzard takes a new approach to professional esports in the digital age

by Daniel Tack

DYNASTY
GLA
FUSION
BAMF
OUTLAWS
UPRISING
MAYHEM

FUSION
FUSION
LONDON

London. Los Angeles. Shanghai. Seoul. With Overwatch League, Blizzard is taking an ambitious step forward for esports, setting up a global platform with city-based teams it hopes will connect with local fans for generations to come. Taking a page out of traditional sports franchises and combining it with one of the hottest team-based multiplayer games, salaried players, and a robust inaugural schedule, the first year of Overwatch League sets the stage for what could become a new standard for the ever-growing world of digital competition. Kicking off on January 10 with a prize pool of $3.5 million, the Overwatch League's grand finals for the year begin on July 26. Take a look at what makes the Overwatch League tick, from the teams, the commissioner, the fans, the owners, the players, and the managers.

CHANGING THE GAME

Many other esports leagues and tournaments boast worldwide competition, but teams can vanish seemingly overnight, with players splintering off at random to form new teams with new names. Overwatch League's franchise format keeps the team location locked, so you'll be able to root for your team every year, even if there are some player swaps.

The Overwatch League features 12 permanent, city-embedded franchises. Think the Detroit Lions or the Dallas Cowboys, but for Overwatch, with names like New York Excelsior or San Francisco Shock. Down the line, Blizzard sees these teams becoming household names, passed down from generation to generation like current longstanding sports fandom and rivalries. That passion isn't restricted to the USA, either, as the league is international.

"It's all the best players in the world – we don't have any restrictions on where players can be from," says league commissioner Nate Nanzer. "We're playing in Los Angeles in our first year, and that's to make sure our teams have time to build out a local capability, but the eventual goal is that all these games will be played in a home and away format."

Over the course of the last summer, the league closed the deals with the original 12 franchises. Once they staffed up their front office and coaching positions, they had a player signing period where they could sign up to 12 free agents.

While not entirely unique to Overwatch League, the concept of salaried players with healthcare benefits is a far cry from floating professional players in other game circuits who are constantly trying to score a big tournament or new sponsorship to stay above water. The players who crack a league roster have a guaranteed minimum salary of $50,000 per person, and the job includes benefits like health insurance and a retirement plan. Bidding wars drove the salaries as high as $150,000 for elite players, which Jay "sinatraa" Won received from the San Francisco Shock. "It's a real career, and it was really important for us to make sure that Overwatch League players were celebrated and treated like the professionals that they are," Nanzer says.

SHOCK
LONDON
SHOCK
LONDON

If you're a hotshot Overwatch player, your skills could take you all the way to the league – sort of like being recognized at a pickup basketball game. The process starts in the Open Division, which accepts anyone who has reached the game's highest ranks. The top four teams who succeed in the Open Division earn a spot in the Contender Trials, an event that starts in February and gives teams a shot to earn a spot in the Overwatch Contenders. These tournaments serve as the developmental league for the most promising talent, putting the best amateur teams in the same pool as professional ones. Getting noticed here is the surest way to get signed to an Overwatch League team for season two. Those looking to start new teams can begin here to form their rosters and scout out fresh talent. The league hasn't outlined whether new player acquisitions will happen via a draft or free agency, only that "In future seasons, players will be signed in a way that serve[s] the needs of an established league, its teams, players, and fans," according to Dot Esports.

"We're really trying to build out the entire sport of Overwatch and make sure that there's a clear path to pro for players and that players know exactly the steps they need to take to be a pro player," Nanzer says.

The Original 12 Teams

ATLANTIC DIVISION

Boston Uprising
Florida Mayhem
Houston Outlaws
London Spitfire
New York Excelsior
Philadelphia Fusion

PACIFIC DIVISION

Dallas Fuel
Los Angeles Gladiators
Los Angeles Valiant
San Francisco Shock
Seoul Dynasty
Shanghai Dragons

BLIZZARD
ARENA
LOS ANGELES
HGC

Enter The Arena

The first season of Overwatch League takes place in the new Blizzard Arena in Los Angeles. While it's been dramatically overhauled, these matches will be held on the same stage that once hosted *The Tonight Show* during the Johnny Carson and Jay Leno years. Seating for more than 450 people is available in addition to special spectator boxes, training facilities, and lounges. The grand finals will take place at a much larger venue, one which Blizzard hasn't announced yet.

BLIZZARD
ENTERTAINMENT
OVERWATCH
LEAGUE

GETTING THE TEAM TOGETHER

Putting together an Overwatch League team isn't easy. Blizzard has some intense requirements to meet, including substantial startup fees that dwarf other esports initiatives. ESPN reported the buy-in to get into the league started at $20 million, and many established competitive teams balked at the price considering guaranteed revenue sharing doesn't begin until after the 2021 season.

I asked Florida Mayhem part-owner John Kracum about the challenges involved in starting up one of these teams. "Yeah, there were about 20 million challenges," Kracum jokes. "The initial challenge from our organization's perspective was, 'What does the value proposition look like?' We're putting in a lot of money, time, and energy into creating a new team. We had Misfits' Overwatch team leading up to the Overwatch League, so we had some foundation in place, but to really buy into this model and into the future of this league, it took a lot of thought and what the opportunities could be around it."

The up-front cost is steep, but Florida Mayhem part-owner Jake Kuhn sees the investment in Overwatch League as something that will resonate for years to come, with the esports scene shifting to rival – or even eclipse – traditional sports in terms of scope, reach, and generational impact.

"I kind of want to jump ahead to 10, 15, maybe 20 years down the line," he says. "What I'm really excited and hoping to see is when fandom is inherited by your parents rather than kind of just diving around online or following your favorite players."

TRAINING ALL DAY, EVERY DAY

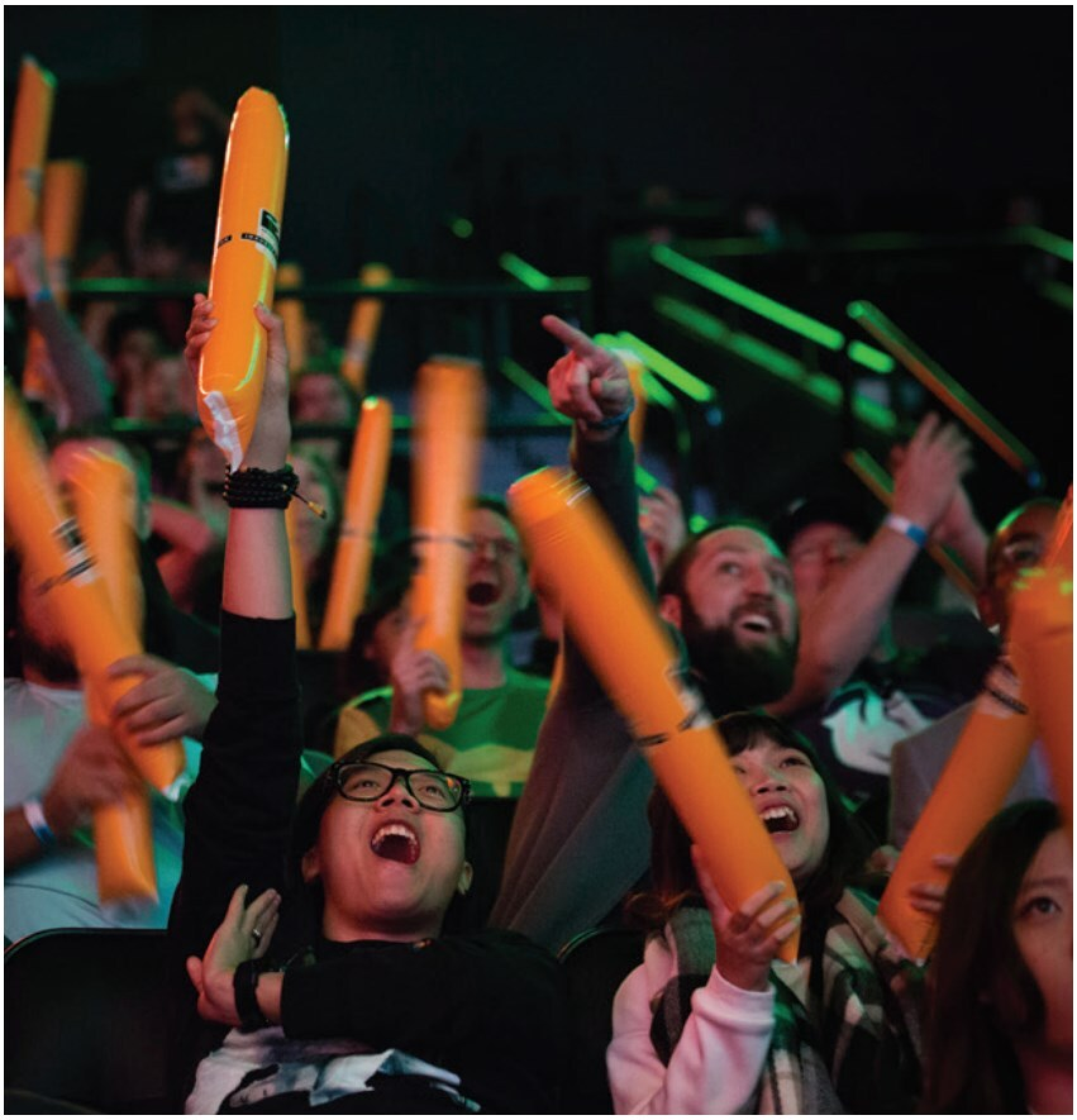
In the build-up to the kickoff, the daily routine for Overwatch League players is intense, including hours upon hours of watching games, playing games, and analyzing everything from metagame picks to how a rival team plays on specific maps with specific characters. The training regimen is excruciatingly time-consuming, often lasting from sunup to sundown. Many have come from other competitive esports games like League of Legends or other

MLG
NETWORK

Firing Up The Fans

Overwatch League teams play with custom skins to show off their colors. These jersey-style skins are available for all characters in the game, and can be acquired by fans in-game. Purchasing these skins provides monetary support for teams, and these are not linked to the traditional randomized loot boxes in any way. Players can buy a token to purchase one of these skins, and they can select the exact team and character skins they want with this purchase. If you want a Philadelphia Fusion Genji or a Houston Outlaws Hanzo, you can get exactly what you're looking for without worrying about duplicates, sprays, or emotes.

In addition to in-game gear, a full line of real-world, team-based apparel and accessories is available for purchase, from caps and pins to jackets and jerseys.



MOBAs, seeking newfound glory in Overwatch.

Seb "Numlocked" Barton plays on Los Angeles Valiant as the "main tank" role with Winston or Reinhardt, though his coach is trying to move away from these clearly defined roles to add more flexibility to the roster. Barton's day is measured out in segments – almost every moment going to the game.

"[The day] typically lasts until 6:00-7:00 p.m., and you can relax then in your free time – but people kind of end up playing ranked anyway, because everyone is so focused on improving," Barton says. "There's a lot on the line, and if you're not ready to put in the work to improve there's going to be someone behind you to take your place."

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

Former StarCraft 2 Pro Chris "Huk" Loranger has taken over the general manager reins of the Boston Uprising team, which is owned by New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft. As the team manager, it's Loranger's job to make sure everything flows smoothly from top to bottom, relaying communications from ownership and instructing coaches on day-to-day operations. Like a player's schedule, Loranger's day is packed from start to finish. As is the case for many of us, his day starts with a significant amount of email at 6:00 a.m., but things diverge quickly after that point. At around 9:30 a.m. he's starting to review the VODs (videos-on-demand) that have been assembled by the coaches for the day to ensure a successful education session on the day. VOD review has a range – watching how the team performs both individually and as a team, watching how upcoming opponents play, watching how different players perform under various circumstances and with certain characters. Analysis of these replays and matches can make all the difference in determining where to focus your next performance boost or critical strategy swap.

"Generally in esports a lot of people have raw talent but they don't necessarily have the professional background to structure things or put them into correct processes," Loranger says.

Loranger arrives at the training facility at around 11:00 a.m., where he participates in additional VOD review, has lunch, and then the team scrimmages until around 8-9 p.m.. After that, there's a staff meeting and more VOD review, and he generally gets to bed around midnight to 2:00 a.m..

"I'm viewing this from a startup mentality – it is building a company more or less from the ground up," Loranger says. "I think we'll get into a rhythm eventually and I'll have more consistent and lower hours, but I don't mind it at all. My main job and hardest job is figuring out the best steps for getting us from the team we are today to a better team in a week or a month, and how do I efficiently use all these staff members to do that."

The Boston Uprising is widely considered the underdogs for the league's inaugural season, but Loranger is excited for the chance to make a great underdog story happen.

OUR DIGITAL FUTURE

One of the most common themes in talking to individuals involved with Overwatch League is there is a very real feeling that esports could potentially overtake traditional sports in the next five to fifteen years. While it would be easy to dismiss these sentiments because everyone involved has a vested interest in the success of Overwatch League, there's a real chance it could happen thanks to the insane amount of viewership, prize pools, and shifting sensibilities as viewers and fans move online and away from the television. We don't yet know what major platforms such as Twitch or YouTube will be airing the league, but for now we can see how the action plays out during Overwatch League's first season, which can be viewed at overwatchleague.com and MLG.com. ◆

The Good

Fan-favorite series Soulcalibur and Bayonetta are getting new iterations in **SOULCALIBUR VI** (shown) and Bayonetta 3, respectively. The Bandai Namco fighter hits the PS4, Xbox One, and PC sometime in 2018. Bayonetta 3 is a Switch exclusive but its release window has not been revealed. Sega also announced that the first two Bayonettas are coming to the Switch on February 16.

The Bad

In perhaps what is a new benchmark for the wasteland of microtransactions and borderline vaporware, developer Roberts Space Industries is selling virtual land claims for **STAR CITIZEN**. That's a claim license for an unspecified piece of real estate in an alpha game which already is in danger of never releasing as envisioned and advertised.

The Ugly

DISNEY shuts down Diablo-like game Marvel Heroes sooner than originally announced, and severs ties with developer Gazillion. This caused a mass layoff at the studio without severance or paid time off for the employees.

Quotable

"Let me put it this way: I hope we'll see events occur that you don't have to ask me that question next PSX."

Shawn Layden, Sony Interactive Entertainment America president and CEO, teases we may be able to change our PSN usernames in 2018.

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THE BEST TABLETOP GAMES OF 2017

by Matt Miller

The tabletop gaming world had a year of innovation and design excellence, with dozens of stellar releases. Many of the best new projects of 2017 boasted intricate "legacy" elements, allowing groups to carry over storytelling and add new game elements from one session to the next. Read on for some of the best in the hobby scene.

THE 7TH CONTINENT

Publisher: Serious Poulp
Who's it for? Invested explorers in for a lengthy expedition

Inspired by the "weird" pulp fiction of the early 20th century, The 7th Continent is a story-driven adventure and exploration game built to be played over many interconnected sessions. You and your fellow explorers bear a mysterious curse, and only by discovering the secrets of a lost land can you hope to survive. It's wildly innovative and as punishing to its heroes as the Lovecraftian stories it emulates.

Fallout
Bethesda
A POST-NUCLEAR BOARD GAME FOR 1 – 4 PLAYERS
DESIGNED BY ANDREW FISCHER & NATHAN HAJEK

FALLOUT

Publisher: Fantasy Flight Games
Who's it for? Post-nuclear super mutants ready to explore the wasteland

Fans of the video game franchise can't go wrong with this stellar adventure game. From uncovering an unexplored map filled with irradiated monsters to leveling up your S.P.E.C.I.A.L. skills, the board game nails the setting. A brilliant event-based card deck system sees new specific cards get shuffled in as a response to players' decisions, so every playthrough is customized.

GLOOMHAVEN

Publisher: Cephalofair Games
Who's it for? Especially ambitious dungeon crawlers

The massive scope of this tactical fantasy combat game is hard to overstate. Players work together while pursuing their own secret goals as they confront dungeon adventures and engage in an ingenious card-based battle system. In between adventures, the entire world grows and changes in response to player choices, leading to a sprawling campaign that lasts dozens of hours.

A game by
Eric M. Lang
The Godfather
CORLEONE'S EMPIRE
Art by
Karl Kopinski

THE GODFATHER: CORLEONE'S EMPIRE

Publisher: CMON
Who's it for? Wannabe gangsters who enjoy area control

Control one of the crime families of New York, vying for supremacy under the wary eye of the Don. Melding classic Euro-style worker placement with zone control of New York's boroughs, Corleone's Empire also boasts gorgeous unpainted minis, and even a metal suitcase to hold all your laundered money.

AZUL

Publisher: Plan B Games
Who's it for? Artistic tacticians

This stunning-yet-accessible game casts players as tile-laying wall artists in service to the Portuguese king, beautifying his palace with the ceramic artform called azulejos. Take turns choosing attractive resin tile pieces to fill out your wall, scoring for smart collection and placement. Abstract and beautiful, Azul's brisk playtime is matched by high replayability.

CHARTERSTONE

Publisher: Stonemaier Games
Who's it for? Enterprising village builders

There's not much to your tiny village as your first game of Charterstone begins. The real joy is watching the game board grow and unraveling secrets over multiple sessions. Players compete to place workers and build new structures across the charming and colorful landscape. After a dozen games, your village is complete, and your copy of the game remains playable, but completely different from any other copy.

CLANK! IN! SPACE!

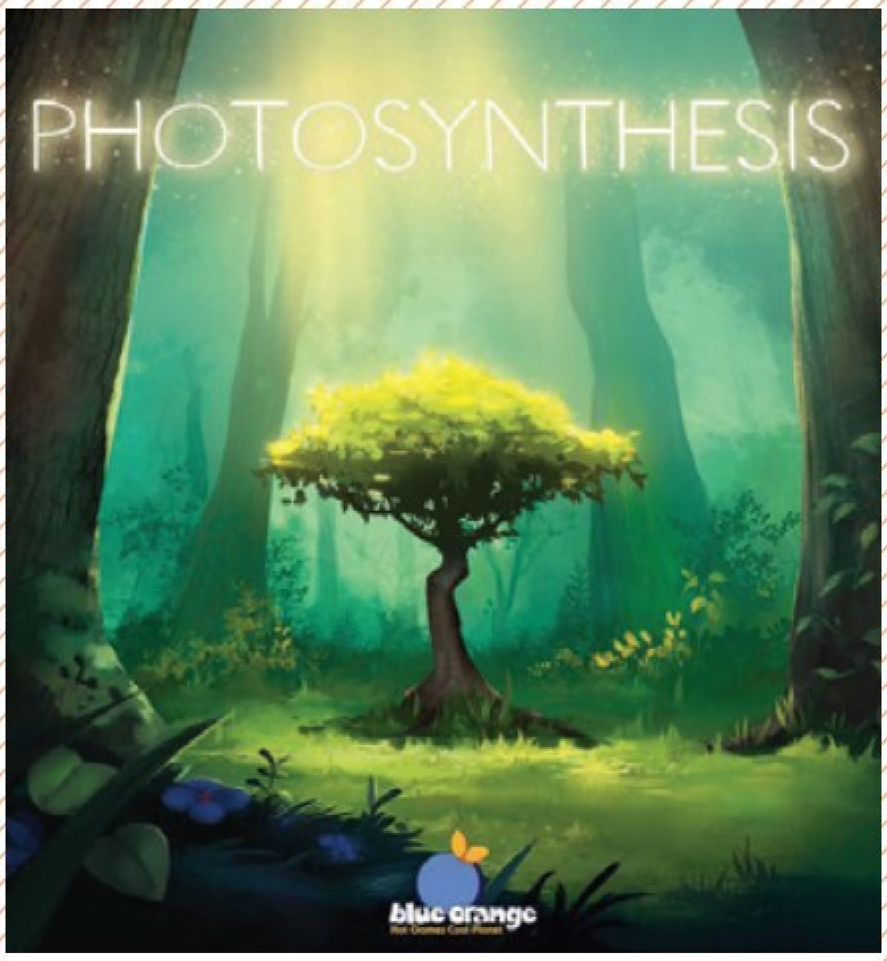
Publisher: Renegade Game Studios
Who's it for? Sneaky outer space thieves with a sense of humor

An evolution of the excellent deck-building fantasy card game called Clank, the new version is more than just a sci-fi reskin. Players try to sneak aboard the evil space overlord's spaceship and steal his stuff, all while trying not to make too much noise and attract the bad guys. The amusing card art may parody your favorite outer space tropes, but the engrossing stealth-based gameplay is the real attraction.

PANDEMIC LEGACY: SEASON 2

Publisher: Z-Man Games
Who's it for? Cooperative survivors ready to make hard choices

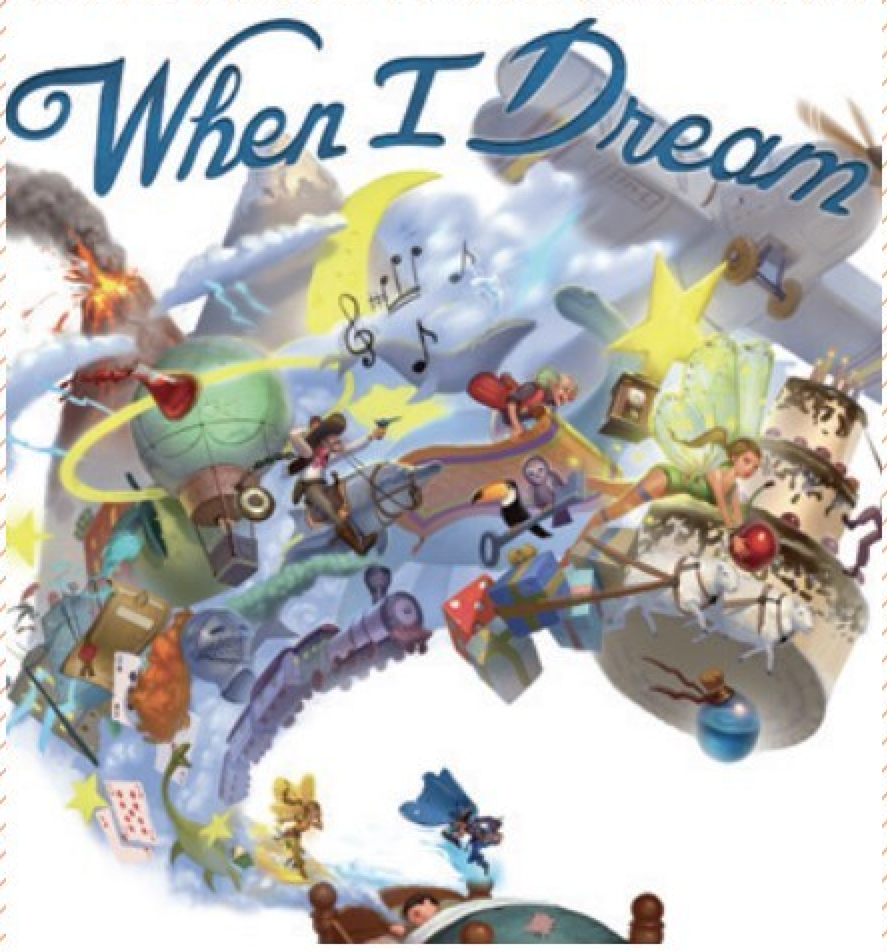
The first Pandemic Legacy saw humanity's slow descent into chaos as disease overwhelmed civilization. 70 years later, it's time to reclaim the world. One of the most engrossing cooperative games ever made receives a sequel in this compelling campaign of resilience and impossible decisions. Every session, new rules, characters, and game board elements change the dynamic, leaving players reeling to keep up.



PHOTOSYNTHESIS

Publisher: Blue Orange Games
Who's it for? Kids and adults who love the natural world

This accessible yet surprisingly nuanced strategy game challenges players to grow a forest. Compete to capture sunlight for your tree color as the sun slowly circles the board, shining down from new directions all the time. As your three-dimensional tree game pieces grow, their shadows hamper the growth of other seedlings, transforming the simple mechanic into a conundrum of careful positioning.



WHEN I DREAM

Publisher: Repos Production
Who's it for? Party gamers who love words and stories

One player dons a blindfold as the titular dreamer, and everyone else prompts them with clues, trying to get them to guess specific words printed on the beautifully illustrated cards. The problem is, not everyone at the table is giving correct clues. Afterward, the dreamer narrates their (likely bonkers) dream to include the guessed words, leading to a hilarious but rich game of deduction and deception.

Head to gameinformer.com/topofthetable for more extensive write-ups on each game, plus additional entries on the best tabletop role-playing games of the year.

THE CREATIVE BET

With its new indie publishing label, Private Division, Take-Two gambles on giving developers what they've always asked for – control of their own creative destiny

by Matt Bertz

VP of production Allen Murray (left) and label head Michael Worosz (top) are spearheading the new Take-Two initiative

The video game industry is built on unsteady ground. Its tectonic plates constantly shift as this $100 billion global business expands to new platforms, publishers search for new revenue models, and studios rise and fall. The volatile but lucrative console market makes it hard to maintain solid footing over a long period of time. Why spend hundreds of millions of dollars on novel new ideas that could fail in this hypercompetitive landscape when you could sink more marketing and funding into sure bets like Madden, Call of Duty, or World of Warcraft, making them living services that continue to receive new content throughout the year?

The argument makes sense from a short-term business perspective, but playing it safe stifles innovation, which could hurt these companies and brands in the long run. This leaves the door wide open for a disruptor like Private Division to emerge. This new Take-Two publishing label stands alongside Rockstar and 2K Games, but it plays by much different rules. Rather than going big with benchmark-setting endeavors like Grand Theft Auto or supporting perennial juggernauts like NBA 2K, the new label's directive is to identify smaller teams of experienced developers with great ideas, fund their smaller scale projects that still have Triple-A production values, and in a surprise twist, let the studios keep the rights to the intellectual property.

Private Division's unconventional approach found a receptive audience in the many talented developers burned out from working on 300-person teams and playing office politics. The first four studios that signed deals with the newly formed publisher boast impressive resumes with games like Assassin's Creed, Fallout, Halo, and Battlefield. Each project maintains the production values gamers expect given the developers' pedigree, but deliver an experience tighter in scope and scale (think Ninja Theory's Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice). All are bringing new concepts they are passionate about to life in the hopes of finding the footing that can prove so elusive in this industry.

ACTION PUBLISHING

Michael Worosz is no stranger to risk. A former naval intelligence officer who once held the nation's top security clearance, Worosz's idea of a good time is scaling mountains and either biking or skiing back down, depending on the season. That comfort with danger serves him well in the high stakes world of business development, where he's aided Take-Two for the last seven years.

While looking for acquisition and investment opportunities in recent years, Worosz kept coming across a similar type of pitch that didn't quite fit under either the Rockstar or 2K Games umbrellas. "We assessed the market and saw numerous instances of proven creatives darkening our door who had left major studio systems and were interested in working on something more entrepreneurial," he says. "They were more enamored with the idea of focusing on the game product and leading smaller, more nimble teams, and were less interested in working in 300-400 person organizations for five-plus years to bring a new quad-A game to market."

As the landscape stood two and a half years ago, publishers weren't funding many of these types of projects. Indie houses like Devolver focused on more nimble, lower-budget games like Hotline Miami, major publishers concentrated on the triple-A and mobile spaces, and private equity companies were more enamored with lucrative mobile gaming investments. Mid-sized studios looking for backing beyond crowd-funding and self-funding had few options, despite their promising game ideas and impressive track records.

Sensing an untapped talent market ripe for the picking, Worosz put together a pitch for chairman and CEO Strauss Zelnick. He saw the potential as well, and gave Worosz the green light to create a new Take-Two publishing label specializing in identifying and supporting the most promising "triple-I" projects. Private Division was born.

The Outsiders' Project Wight

ZIGGING INSTEAD OF ZAGGING

In game development, creators rarely have the last word when it comes to the execution of their vision. Too often in large-scale publishing, their concept can be compromised by too many cooks in the kitchen. This can create schisms between the business and creative camps, such as the Call of Duty creators Vince Zampella and Jason West's ugly and litigious falling-out with Activision.

Relinquishing control of the IP or leaving creators to their own creative devices may be a non-starter for the vast majority of A-tier game publishers, but other media has evolved beyond this paradigm. Many Hollywood studios and record labels understand they don't need to demand complete control over a project to develop a beneficial relationship.

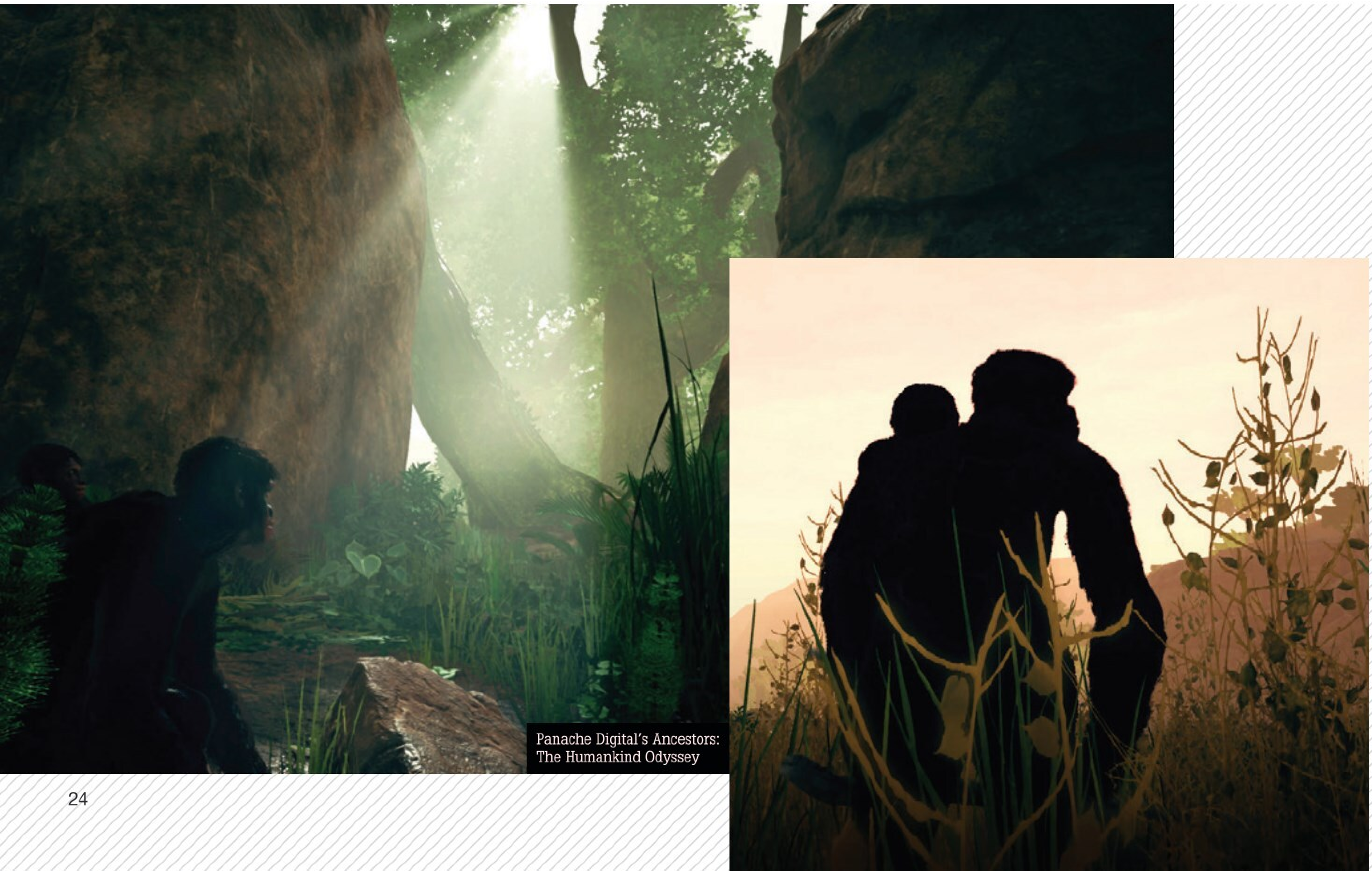
"This is the thing I take from Strauss Zelnick's playbook," Worosz says. "He's been a career entertainment executive who has worked in Hollywood, music, and now video games… What that means practically is no one on the Take-Two management team will ever opine on how a game should look, feel, or play. No one's ever going to tell the people in the studios that we've partnered with what a game should look like. That's for the team on the ground working on that game every day."

Worosz understood that by offering the game development Holy Grail no other publisher was even willing to discuss, let alone surrender for projects of this scope, Private Division had a great opportunity for attracting top talent to its label. All the developers we spoke with at Panache, Obsidian, V1 Interactive, and The Outsiders said retaining their IP was the most significant factor in signing with Private Division.

"We didn't want to cede control of this thing, essentially," says The Outsiders co-founder David Goldfarb, the former Battlefield: Bad Company 2 and Payday 2 lead whose studio is publishing its first game with Private Division. "You always hope for the best, but maybe in some cases, and I know from talking to friends of mine, you lose control of the thing that you spend an enormous amount of energy and time on."

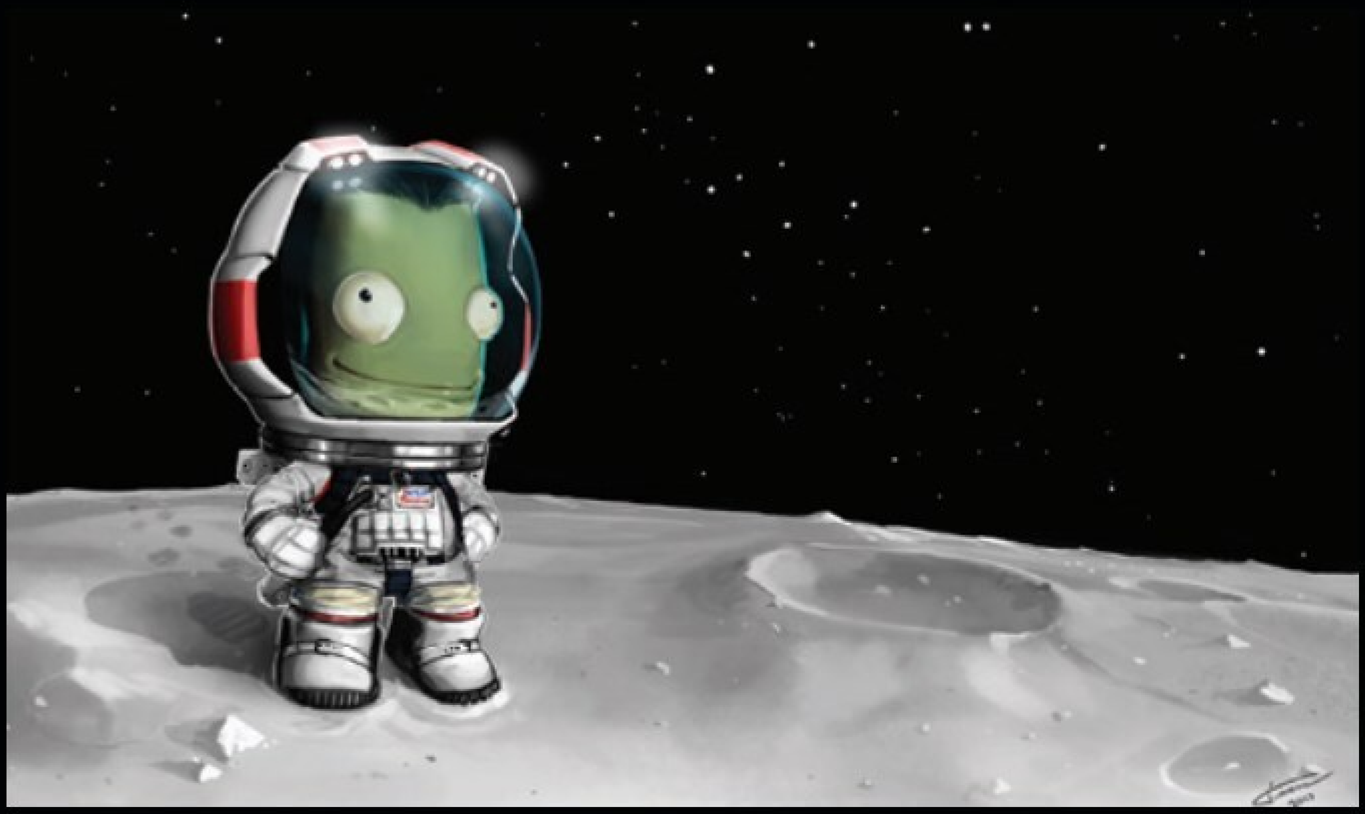
For The Outsiders, controlling its IP is essential for its other business endeavors. The founders see their studio as an entertainment company that hopes to extend the IP through movies, TV, clothing, comics, and other merchandising opportunities.

Beyond the IP retention, receiving backing from a major publisher also helped these studios in another critical era – talent acquisition. "It was way easier for us to recruit new team members," says Panache Digital co-founder Patrice Désilets. Best known for his work on the formative Assassin's Creed titles, his next title, Ancestors: The Humankind Odyssey, is being published under the Private Division label. "The ecosystem here in Montreal is really competitive, so when we could say to people, 'We're not only a studio with a little bit of money, but we're being backed by real pros, so don't worry and come join us instead of going to the big studios.' It helped us a lot."


Panache Digital's Ancestors: The Humankind Odyssey

The Studio Partners

Private division has signed deals with studios with talented developers who have helped create franchises like Assassin's Creed, Fallout, and Halo. Here is a sneak peek at its game lineup.



Squad

***Game:** Kerbal Space Program*

The lone acquisition in the Private Division game portfolio, Kerbal Space Program needs no introduction. The ambitious sandbox sim that gives you control of your own space program has more than two million players already across PS4, Xbox One, and PC.

"With all the success they had with Kerbal, I think they came to the realization that for them to continue on that success, they were really going to have to invest in themselves much more greatly in the studio and increase the ambitions overall," says label head Michael Worosz. "That just wasn't in their plan, so that gave rise to an acquisition opportunity that we were fortunate we could pounce upon."

The Take-Two deal allows Squad to continue broad support for updates and DLC across all three platforms.

The Outsiders

***Game:** Project Wight [working title]*

Revealed with a 2016 trailer that more than two million people have watched, the next game from the mind of David Goldfarb (Battlefield: Bad Company 2, Payday 2) flips the RPG trope on its head and places players in the role of a Grendel-like monster being hunted by humans. The debut trailer demonstrated high production values more in line with triple-A games and an intriguing Viking sandbox world. In later interviews, Goldfarb divulged that the narrative is a dynamic experience rather than a linear story.

"David writes some really good dark fiction, so I've been really excited about the world he's creating," says Private Division executive producer and EP of production Allen Murray.

V1 Interactive

***Game:** Unannounced FPS*

A longtime Bungie veteran who helped create and develop the Halo and Destiny universes, Marcus Lehto left his home of nearly 20 years to form a new studio that gets him back to a smaller scale development experience where you don't need name tags to know who everyone is.

"I took my time exploring and getting ideas, and I poked around in a lot of different things with different fiction universes, and one kept percolating to the top," Lehto says. "There was something about this game idea that I got really excited about, so I hired a couple programmers to help me develop a small demo."

V1 is keeping its project behind closed doors for the time being, but Lehto gave us one broad design stroke to stoke our imaginations. "The most I can say right now is it's a sci-fi first-person shooter very unlike any shooter that you've probably seen," he says. "It's kind of in our DNA, it's the kind of thing our studio is really dang good at making, so we are excited to every day be pushing this game forward from the story perspective to the multiplayer side of things and all the other big parts."

Obsidian Entertainment

***Game:** Unannounced RPG*

The role-playing veterans at Obsidian are using their Private Division partnership to reunite original Fallout creators Tim Cain and Leonard Boyarsky for a new game set in a new universe.

"It was the opportunity to work with Tim on a new IP that we were creating from scratch again, because we did it on Fallout and Arcanum and those were great experiences and I just missed doing that, says Boyarsky, who most recently worked on Diablo III for Blizzard. "I missed working on single-player, in-depth RPGs with a lot of choice, consequence, and reactivity. I like making other types of games, but there is something special about the kind of games we started with Fallout that really appeals to us and speaks to us creatively."

The duo plans to reveal more about the project at a later date, but Cain says "If people have liked our previous RPGs they're going to like this one in terms of how we make reactive worlds and especially our style of humor."

Panache Digital

***Game:** Ancestors: The Humankind Odyssey*

Led by Assassin's Creed creator Patrice Desilets, the team at Panache is making a third-person action survival game that transports you to early human history, where mankind sits firmly in the lower-half of the food chain and mortal threats surround them. In development for two years now, since they signed with Private Division the developers shifted from an episodic model to a more traditional release that tracks the main character's lineage through many historical periods. The team is taking their time to make sure they get this experience right.

"Right now, the game is always in playable form – it's really important for us we always have a build," Desilets says. "We build 15 different builds a day. I play every night at my place, and it's really unique, fun, different, epic experience that we're building and I'm proud of what the team is doing."

DREAMWEAVERS

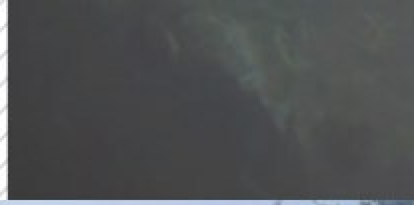
Since the studios control the creative vision and execution, Private Division had to re-examine the fundamental publisher/developer relationship. The label needed to embrace a reactive approach that foregoes making broad decrees about game direction and instead enables teams to overcome any potential roadblocks that arise during development. To do so, Worosz hired a VP of production with first-hand experience sitting on the other side of the table.

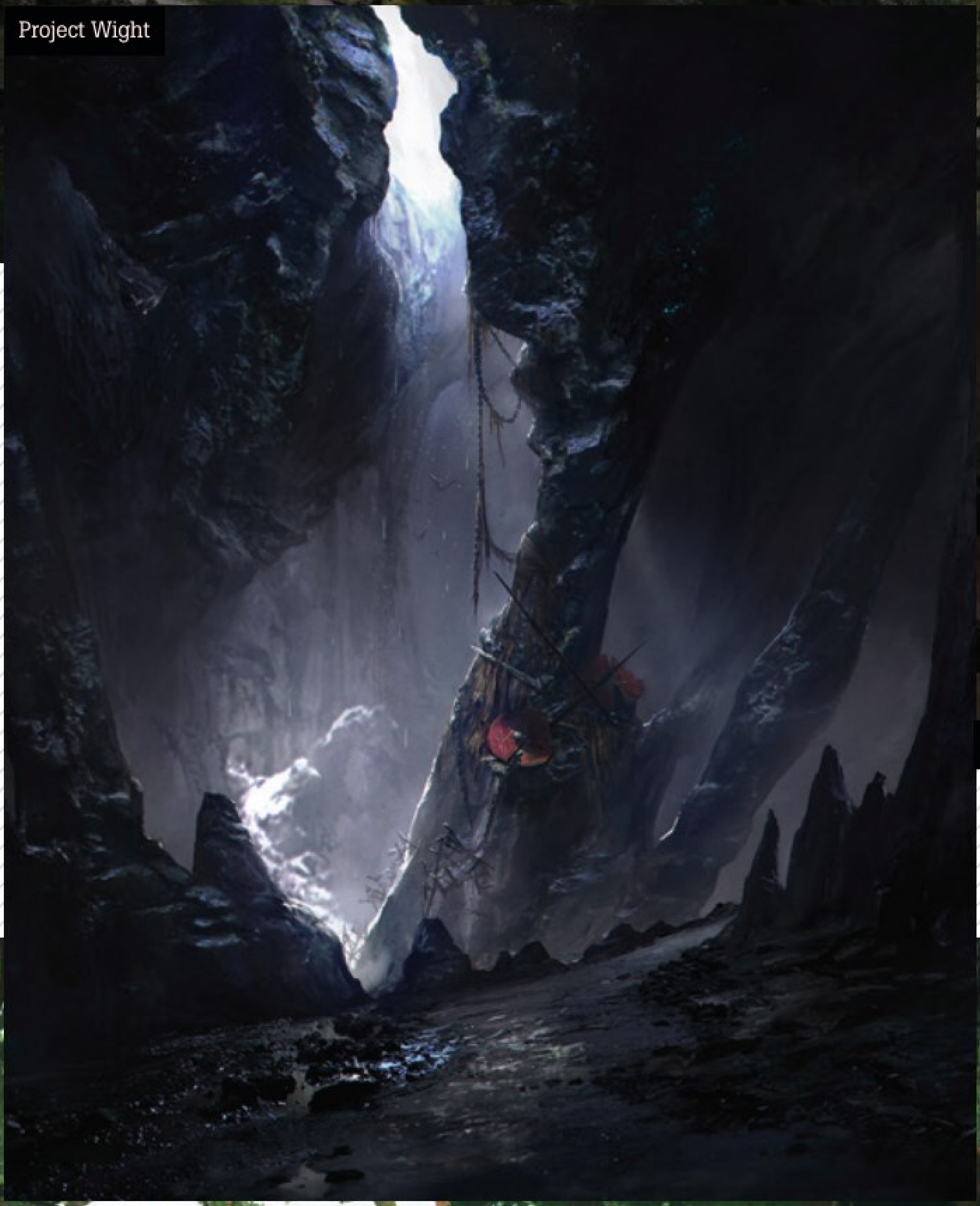
A longtime developer with an impressive resume that includes stints at Bungie, Microsoft, and PopCap, Allen Murray strives for Private Division to be a "light-touch publisher." He doesn't want a lot of label employees attached to these projects in positions that could strong-arm the creative vision. Instead, he thinks about how to best support the projects.

"I think we sometimes act as therapists," Murray says. "We hear about all these things they are worried about and take it all in and think about it and try to help them find a solution. Or maybe we just listen, you know? Just help them bear that weight. Because it's a lot."

The studio leads we spoke with all voiced appreciation for this approach, singing praises for Murray and his team. "I feel a lot more respect about the craft of game making, and that they let us continue having this grand vision and enable us to be even better than what we think we can be," Désilets says. "We goof up and they say, 'Look, we know what you can do, but what about this, what about that?' You're having a really good conversation about gaming."

"I think it has all the strengths of the traditional publisher relationship but because we get to retain ownership of the IP, it's one of the things where I don't think we're worried about our goals aligning with the publisher goals," says Obsidian Entertainment's Tim Cain, who has reunited with fellow Fallout co-creator Leonard Boyarsky to develop a new RPG under the Private Division label. "We both want to see the IP be very successful because we are both vested in it."





Project Wight

Project Wight

Ancestors: The Humankind Odyssey

Project Wight

THE GAMING GAMBIT

Private Division now has four new projects in full production, but don't expect a rapid set of release dates. Murray worked carefully with each studio to map out realistic development timelines that take into account the business realities of building a studio in addition to the game. These releases will likely extend into the latter half of 2019.

"Video games are literally at the point where art meets science, right?" Worosz says. "But very few things go according to a predefined, scientific plan, especially in terms of video game production. Things are going to move around and we're going to make sure that each game has its own moment in the sun."

Once the games get closer to completion, Private Division can flex Take-Two's considerable muscle as an experienced publisher to aid with quality assurance, console certification, localization, and getting the word out about the games. Though the majority of the Private Division staff operates independently from the rest of Take-Two, they share one critical resource: the global sales force.

"With regards to getting the game out there in front of people with marketing and making sure they have all the right avenues and the right amount of cash to put into it, we are so glad they are driving that part of it because if we were completely independent and trying to self-fund or use Kickstarter or something like that, even if you make a great game it's so difficult to get it out there in front of people's eyes and to get people to notice," says Marcus Lehto, a former Halo and Destiny senior developer whose new studio V1 Interactive is working with Private Division on a sci-fi shooter.

All the games will launch digitally first, but should there prove to be demand, Private Division has the means to bring the games to traditional retail channels as well.

In one sense, getting these exciting ideas off the ground and out the door is the "easy" part for Private Division. They have that process mapped out already and the talent to execute. But what happens after this initial lineup of games ship is still up in the air.

Does the label continue to identify and fund exciting new IP with other Triple-I tier indie studios, or does it instead take a more conventional publishing approach and rally around a game where they see franchise potential? Do they continue to make acquisitions, as they did with Kerbal Space Program? These are questions with a lot of moving parts, and Private Division isn't dismissing any potential avenue for growth.

"We've been open to being malleable and changing so I expect us to be constantly evaluating that," Murray says. "You raise a lot of very good and obvious questions, and the answer is we're figuring that out. We want to be able to support these games and these developers as they grow. That may mean that we grow and change with them."

In the meantime, the four games under Private Division continue to revel in their creative freedom, hoping to reignite the spark that helped their studio partners come up with brilliant concepts like Assassin's Creed, Halo, and Fallout.

"To be honest with you, it feels a lot like the early game days," Lehto says. "Initially it was just myself and Jason Jones doing Halo for a number of months before we brought on a larger team. Even still, that team was very small for a large portion of the development of Halo 1. And that was true even at Bungie when we were beginning to develop Destiny. The best work that I think a studio can do is when it's got that small team that's hyper focused on that creative idea and is able to rapidly innovate those creative ideas."

Private Division is betting on it. ◆

A Link To The Past

Shigeru Miyamoto created The Legend of Zelda for Nintendo, but handed the series over to Eiji Aonuma following the release of A Link to the Past. Aonuma served as Zelda's director for Ocarina of Time, The Wind Waker, and Twilight Princess. He is now overseeing the entire Zelda franchise as its producer – a role he is embracing, citing the development of Breath of the Wild as his favorite moment as a game creator. We talked to Aonuma about his career and the daunting task of following in Miyamoto's footsteps.

You began your career at Nintendo in 1988 as an artist. Did you ever see yourself as someone who would be directing Zelda games?
When I entered the company, I didn't think I was going to be someone who would make games. At the time, I didn't even really play them. They had me making pixel art. I was actually making images of Mario that were for kind of a tie-up with something called ochazuke, which is a type of food they have in Japan. I was making Mario drawings for that deal.

Pixel art has a lot of limitations on it. There aren't a lot of shapes you can do, or colors. Even where you can place a pixel is very limited. It's a lot like doing a puzzle, and I thought that was very interesting. I worked with programmers a lot at that time, trying to figure out how to make these things move and control. Through that I gained a lot of knowledge about *interview by Andrew Reiner*

programming, and I eventually started talking to programmers like, “Hey, could you do something this way, or could you change this way?” And they would say, “Well, if you do that, it’s a completely different game.” I started to think that maybe I should make games.

At that time, I encountered The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past. That was the first Zelda game I played. It made a huge impression on me, since it was different than other games I had seen before. It really made me want to make a game. I sort of ended up ripping off that game when I made [Marvelous: Mouhitotsu no Takarajima]. Mr. Miyamoto saw that and said, “If you want to make a Zelda game that much, why don’t you just make a Zelda game?”

Is that how you were brought on to the Zelda team? By Miyamoto recognizing you drew inspiration from his work?
When I initially went to Mr. Miyamoto’s group, I was actually working on a different title. I didn’t go directly to Zelda. That was the time when [Nintendo] was moving over to the Nintendo 64. In that department, we were all working on 3D games. I was working with a foreign team, and learned a lot about 3D games, and after awhile got invited onto the Zelda team.

Since you began your gaming career as an artist, were you still doing some of that for Zelda?
When I was working on that game that was sort of a Zelda ripoff, I was working as an artist. I was doing pixel art. Once I moved to the new group, and the 3D games, I didn’t know any kind of knowledge for 3D art, so I had moved on to more of a game design or level design role – what we call a planner position.

You said you didn’t play games. Was that fresh perspective a benefit to creating something different?
Perhaps. I think there are times where what you don’t know can help you. For example, you don’t get too afraid that you might be too close to something else that already exists. Even at that time where we were making 3D games for the first time, like Ocarina of Time, everyone on that Zelda team was thinking, “Is this right?” and “Is this how it should be?” Everyone at Nintendo that was working on the game was very nervous about it. That’s a very similar experience to what we had on Breath of the Wild. I think that’s very important.

Working in unexplored territory like 3D obviously brings experimentation. Did you have different visions for what Ocarina of Time could be?
More than there being some kind of initial vision, we were all at the time trying to figure out how it should be. There wasn’t any grand design documents at the start. For me in particular, say working on the Water Temple and the other dungeons, I was just taking it as it came, and working on each one separately. We couldn’t see ahead. We couldn’t see what was coming. I think that’s why it took so long for the game to develop.

What kind of advice did you get from Miyamoto for shepherding the Zelda series?
In terms of specific advice about the Zelda series as a whole, I haven’t gotten any specific advice in that sense from Mr. Miyamoto. I will say, though, that I’ve always been struck by how precise and measured he is in everything he says. I’ve always kind of felt I would like to be that precise and accurate when I speak. When he says something it’s so clear and to the point. He’s always reviewing in-progress games of ours, and appraising them, and giving us feedback in clear ways. Personally, something I’ve learned is that I want to try and be that way. I’m not there yet, but that’s a goal for me.

Breath of the Wild director Hidemaro Fujibayashi and I would get together, and kind of worry and scratch our heads. I think that probably isn’t good. That would never happen with Mr. Miyamoto. He would just say exactly what he thought and leave you to it.

Looking back at your entire career, is there one moment or accomplishment that stands out?
You know, I’ve been making Zelda titles for almost my entire career, and the memories start to pile up. I start to forget things, but I think one thing I’ve always been proud of is the fact that Zelda games have always been about new surprises and thinking about different things to try, yet still maintain that Zeldaness, or whatever it is.

To touch on Breath of the Wild, it was really fun to develop – maybe the most fun I’ve ever had making a game. It was because of the staff. They took so much initiative, and were always looking at everything in the game with this eye to improve. They took so much initiative. I could see it every day. As a producer, it gave me a lot of courage, and made me realize “Okay, this could actually work.”

The people who made this game, didn’t have troubled faces. They were smiling the whole time they worked on it. At the start of development, with all of the new things we were doing, I definitely was worried – I had a worried face. As I saw the staff put it together, that concern started to go away. We were doing challenging new things, but we always did them with a smile. I don’t think I’ve experienced that before. The development experience was so great, and the game that came out of it was great. That’s something I’m really proud of.

On top of that, in the [new downloadable content], we got the motorbike I wanted in. That’s what I really want to leave you with. [laughs] ◆

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1988
Eiji Aonuma graduates from Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, majoring in design

1988
Aonuma is hired by Nintendo as an artist, working on various Mario projects including NES Open Tournament Golf

1995
Aonuma helps create a brass band (now known as The Wind Wakers) in which he plays percussion. They still play up to four shows a year

1996
Aonuma directs his first game, Marvelous: Mouhitotsu no Takarajima, which draws heavy inspiration from the Zelda series

1998
Shigeru Miyamoto entrusts Aonuma with the directorial role for Ocarina of Time

2002
Aonuma continues to find success directing Zelda games with the time-bending Majora’s Mask

2003
Aonuma continues to direct Zelda games, but also takes on the responsibility of overseeing all games in the series, including supervising The Minish Cap and producing Four Swords Adventures

2006
Twilight Princess launches and is the last Zelda title Aonuma directs. He continues to oversee all Zelda titles

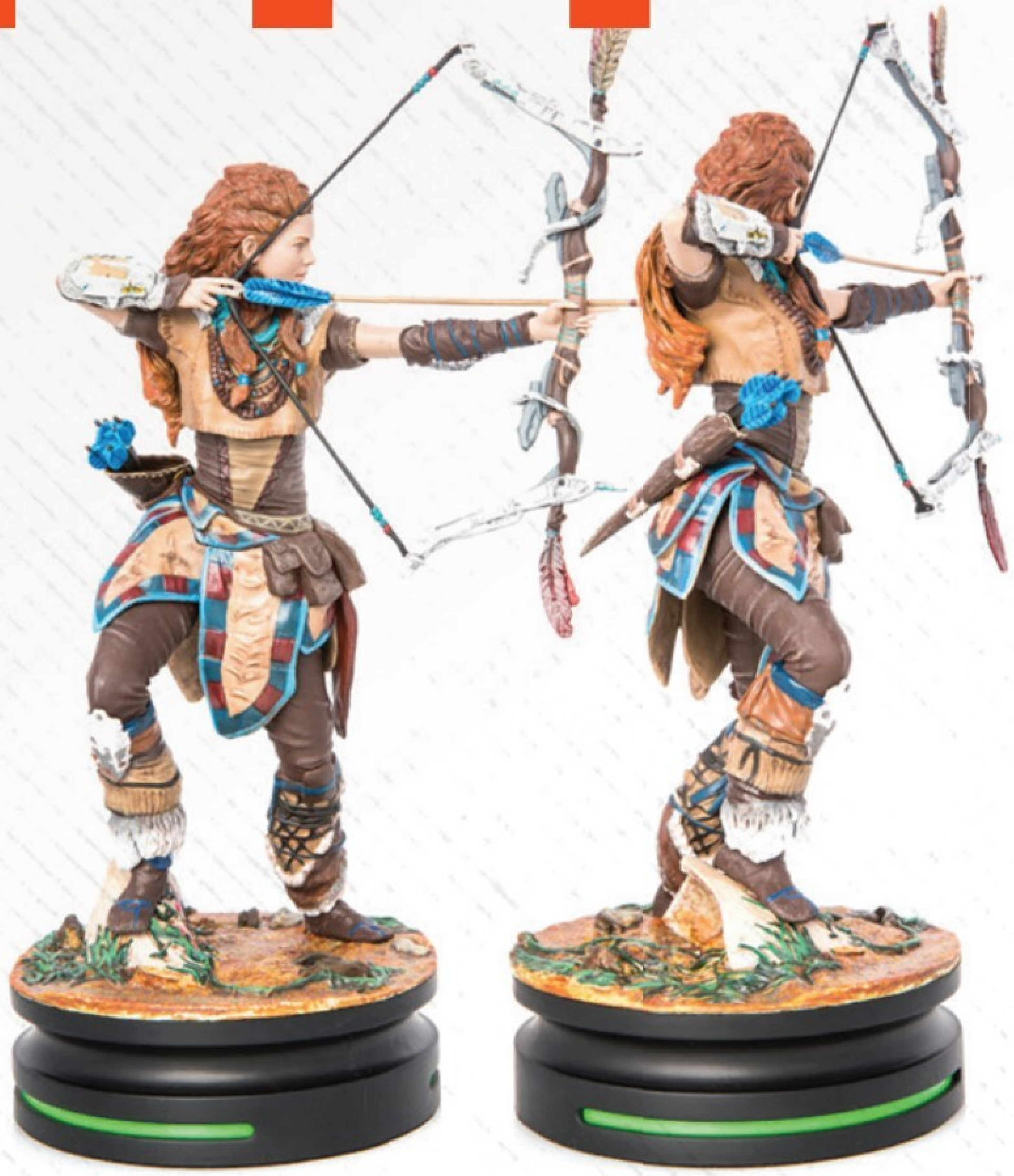
2011
For Skyward Sword, Aonuma hands Zelda’s directorial reigns to Hidemaro Fujibayashi, who directed many of the handheld Zeldas, including Minish Cap, along with Breath of the Wild

2016
Aonuma receives a lifetime achievement award at the Golden Joystick Awards

SHOP 50

Merchandise from *Game Informer's* Top 50 games of the year

by Ben Reeves and Matt Miller



1 Modern Icons Horizon Zero Dawn Aloy Statue

Celebrate your love of robotic-dinosaur slaying with this beautiful (and affordable) PVC statue of Aloy. The full statue stands an impressive 10.5-inches, including its snazzy pedestal base. The sharp colors and impressive sculpt do honor to one of 2017's most engaging heroines.

$39.99 | gear.playstation.com

2

2 Assassin's Creed Origins Bayek Hoodie

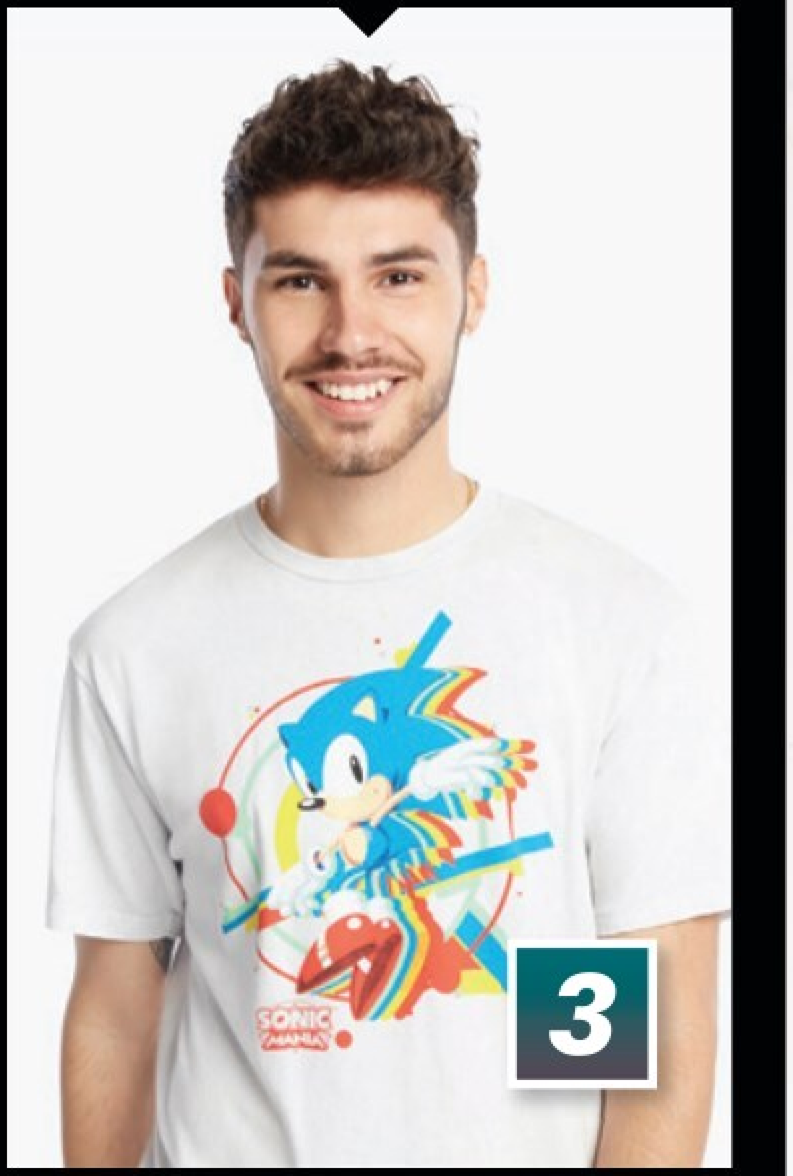
Stay warm while climbing the ancient pyramids of Giza with this custom-designed hoodie modeled after Bayek's signature look from Assassin's Creed Origins. This 100-percent polyester hoodie features an embroidered Eye of Horus symbol on the sleeve and the Assassin's Creed Origins logo on back.

$89.99 | store.ubi.com

3 Sonic Mania Retro T-Shirt

This year might be the first time in decades that you can wear a Sonic the Hedgehog shirt in public with pride. This cotton tee features a colorful Sonic Mania-inspired design that is a loving throwback to the '90s, just like the game.

$28.90 | boxlunch.com



3

4

4 Super Mario Odyssey Cappy

You can't control other people by throwing this life-sized replica of Mario's Cappy at them, but at least you'll look good (subjectively) doing it. This officially licensed Super Mario Odyssey cap has a 7-inch diameter and a 3-inch brim and is 100-percent polyester.

$19.99 | thinkgeek.com

5 Limited Edition Alexa-Enabled Destiny 2 Ghost

Guardians can finally chat with their own personal Ghosts. This attractive collectible connects to an Alexa device (required for use) and your Destiny 2 account, and responds to real-time voice commands, shares select quotes about Destiny's fiction, suggests in-game activities to pursue, and equips your most powerful weapons. ◆

$89.99 | amazon.com

5

Media Shelf

THE ART OF
Wolfenstein II
THE NEW COLOSSUS

PLUCKHEAD
'A CUPHEAD STRING ALBUM'
STRING PLAYER GAMER

ART OF WOLFENSTEIN II

Get the inside scoop on the development of MachineGames' version of a 1960s America flipped upside down by Nazi occupation. This beautiful hardcover is stuffed to the brim with concept art, production material, and exclusive commentary from the developers.

$40.00
store.bethsoft.com

HERO OF TIME VINYL SOUNDTRACK

This officially licensed, one-hour arrangement based on Koji Kondo's sweeping and epic score for The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time has been rerecorded using a 64-piece Slovak National Symphony Orchestra. Zelda has never sounded better.

$40.00
store.iam8bit.com

PLUCKHEAD

Cuphead features a great big-band soundtrack, but its score works equally well with just four strings. Materia Collective has complied this loving tribute to one of the year's best-looking indie games with a blend of classy and high-energy violin/guitar arrangements across 11 fan-favorite tracks.

$7.00
materiacollective.com

[Full Disclosure: GameStop is the parent company of both Game Informer and ThinkGeek]

February2018

GAME RELEASES

Tuesday 06

- Shadow of the Colossus (PS4) ①

Tuesday 13

- Dynasty Warriors 9 (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- Kingdom Come: Deliverance (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- Owlboy (PS4, Xbox One, Switch)
- Radiant Historia: Perfect Chronology (3DS)

Thursday 15

- Secret of Mana (PS4, Vita, PC)

Tuesday 20

- Metal Gear Survive (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

MOVIE & TV PREMIERES

Friday 02

- Strike Back (Cinemax)

Sunday 04

- Super Bowl LII (NBC)

Friday 09

- XXIII Olympic Winter Games Opening Ceremony (NBC)
- The Hurricane Heist (theaters)
- Peter Rabbit (theaters)

Friday 16

- Black Panther (theaters) ②
- Early Man (theaters)

Friday 23

- Annihilation (theaters)
- The Tick (Amazon)
- The War with Grandpa (theaters)

Sunday 25

- Ash vs. Evil Dead (Starz)

GAMER CULTURE

Wednesday 07

The Infinity Saga Reborn

The forthcoming Avengers film is based on Marvel's acclaimed Infinity Gauntlet series. Although theatergoers will see Thanos assembling the Infinity gems, they won't meet one of the comic's key players, Adam Warlock. He was teased at the end of Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2, but isn't a part of the Avengers films. That doesn't mean you can't get acquainted with him. He's returning from the land of the dead in today's new comic series, Infinity Countdown: Adam Warlock, a must-read for comic and movie fans alike.

Tuesday 20

D.I.C.E. Summit 2018

Some of the best talks by game developers happen at D.I.C.E., a three-day gathering in Las Vegas that brings game creators together to discuss the latest trends and developments in our favorite entertainment medium. After learning what is coming next, the show concludes with the D.I.C.E. Awards, a look back at the best games from 2017.

Wednesday 21

Batman: Sins Of The Father ③

Based on Telltale's ongoing Batman games, Sins of the Father is a comic book series that bridges the gap between the first and second seasons. This story begins with a flashback to Thomas Wayne's involvement with Arkham Asylum. Someone is killing people associated with the asylum, but the murders went unsolved. Bruce Wayne is tasked to clear his father's name, but ends up digging up trouble in the process. ◆

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PS4

» STYLE
1-Player Action/ Adventure

» PUBLISHER
Sony Interactive Entertainment

» DEVELOPER
Santa Monica Studio

» RELEASE
Early 2018

WORSHIPPING at NEW ALTARS

How Sony Is Reinventing God of War

Kratos has been a consistent force in the gaming landscape since the first God of War game released in 2005. From that glorious debut, his whirling chain-blades and unbridled rage have captivated fans through many brutal adventures in ancient Greece. But when Kratos reappeared at E3 2016 with the unveiling of the PlayStation 4's new God of War, everything seemed different. Many of the series' hallmarks were transformed or absent. Kratos was in Scandinavia, he had an axe instead of his signature blades, and his screams of rage were replaced by restrained fatherly instruction. These changes prompted some fans to ask, "How is this the Kratos I know and love?" The short answer: It isn't.

by Joe Juba

Sony's Santa Monica Studio is reimagining God of War and its hero in a way that sheds artifacts of the past,

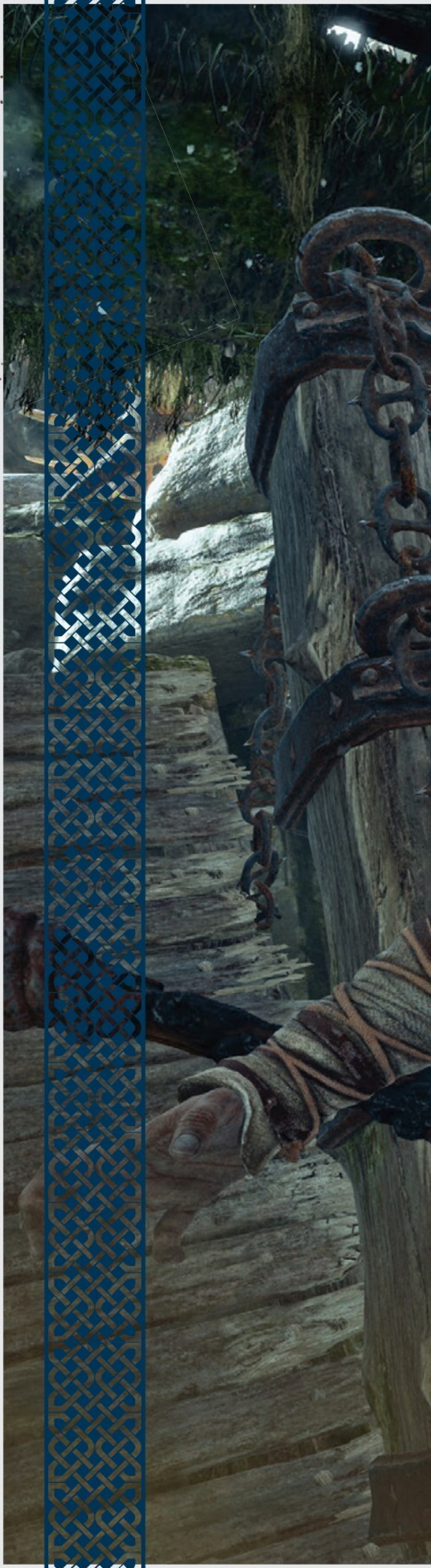
allowing room for the series to evolve in terms of narrative, combat, and exploration. These changes may not result in the formula fans expect, but after playing part of the game for ourselves, they clearly signal the beginning of a new chapter for Kratos and God of War in more ways than one.

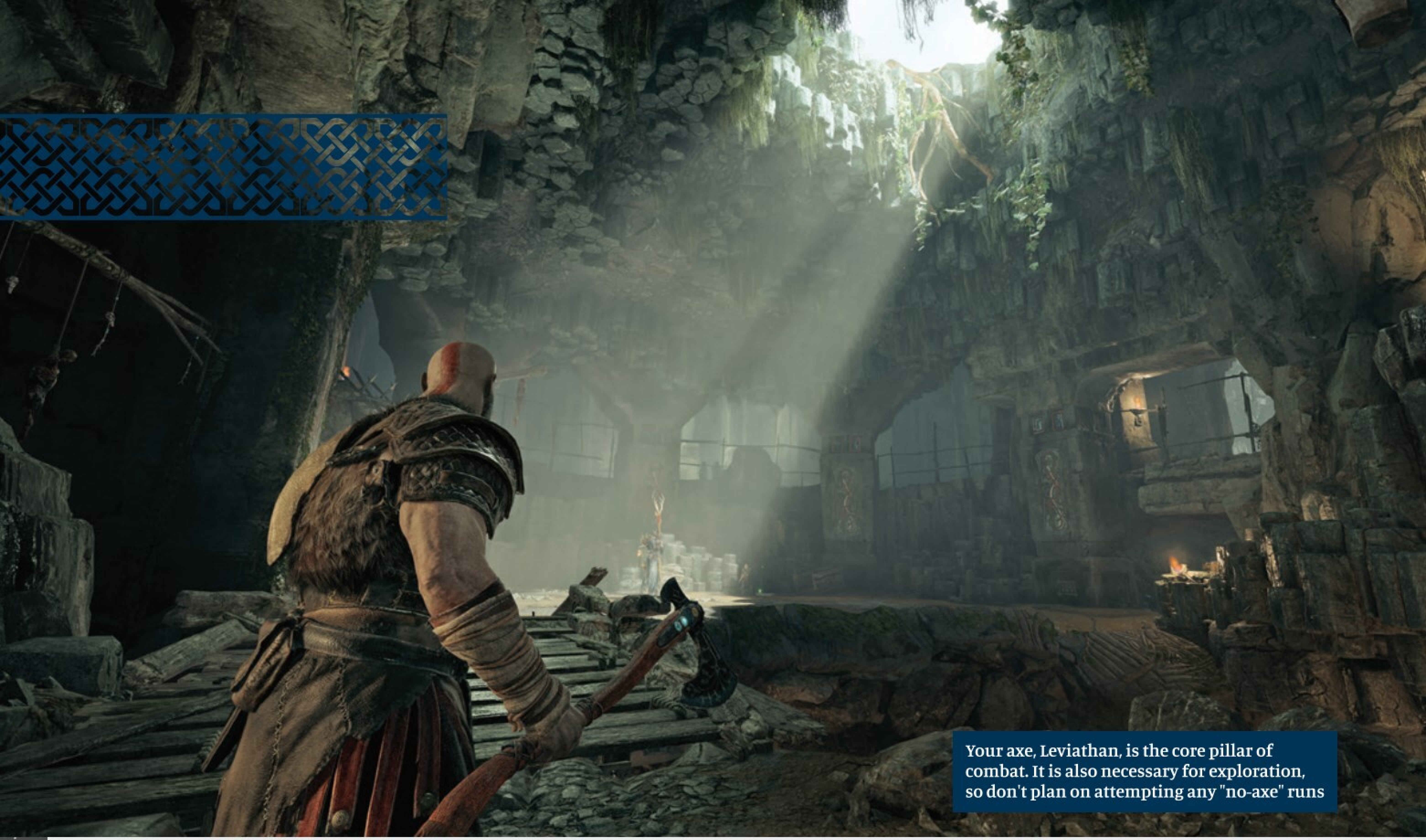
FROM THE ASHES

When it debuted, God of War was edgy. It had an unapologetic antihero, brutal action, and cinematic quick-time events. In the mid-2000s, that combination was a refreshing step away from convention, and demonstrated gaming's potential to tackle mature content in entertaining ways. However, as subsequent entries dug deeper into those elements, the basic tone and style remained unchanged. Today, almost 13 years after it was introduced, the original game's core template feels like part of a different era.

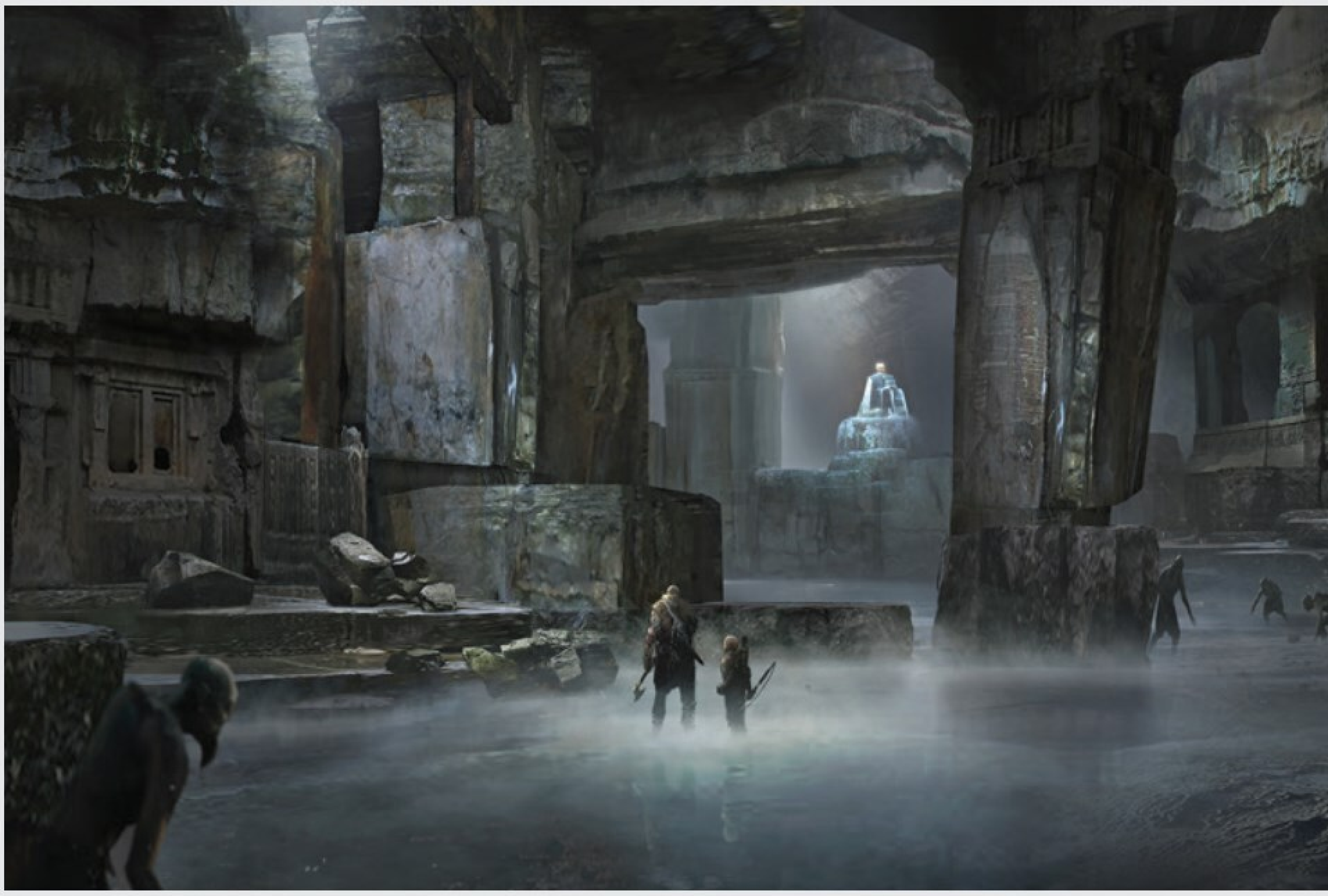
The last game in the series, 2013's God of War: Ascension, did not attain the blockbuster success of its predecessors. It mined Kratos' past for a story that did not feel significant, and held few gameplay surprises. While many studios would love their games to reach a score of 80 on review aggregators, Ascension landing in that territory marked a precipitous drop for the franchise that caused some people to question God of War's future. They thought Kratos' story was over.

"What became apparent to me was that we were watching this franchise wane a bit," says Shannon Studstill, head of Santa Monica Studio. "It was getting old. The storyline with Kratos being the hardcore badass – I think people were starting to say, 'What's next?' I felt like, in order to reinvent, we really needed to turn a lot of things around."





Your axe, Leviathan, is the core pillar of combat. It is also necessary for exploration, so don't plan on attempting any "no-axe" runs



To accomplish that goal, Studstill brought Cory Barlog back into the fold at Santa Monica Studio as creative director. Barlog directed God of War II, and was part of the original God of War team since its early days. Reaching out to someone with such a strong tie to the series' past might seem strange considering the goal was to reimagine God of War's identity, but Studstill says that connection was essential. "I think you need to know the lineage," she says. "It's a very deep storyline, and bringing in someone that understands that history is the respect the franchise deserves."

"You gotta know the rules to break the rules," Barlog jokes. When it comes to breaking rules, he and the team examined every facet of the experience and held nothing sacred. This process resulted in surprising cuts, like jumping, swimming, instant-death platforming challenges, and the beloved Blades of Chaos. However, despite all of these changes, the game still retains the franchise's essence – it has just evolved.

"The core concept that I kept pushing in the early portion of this was this expansion on the original idea… The idea of going on a fantastic adventure," Barlog says. "But a fantastic, meaningful adventure. An adventure that isn't just born out of anger and vengeance, but an adventure born out of this really personal experience that is filled with incredible peaks and valleys of levity and sincerity." Of course, since it's God of War, all of those things also need to be fused with fun and engaging combat.

In trailers and demonstrations since the game's 2016 reveal, we've seen several of the ways that God of War hits those new notes. Kratos has left Greece behind, and is now in the realm of Norse mythology. He has a son, Atreus, but struggles in finding a way to relate to the child. The camera is zoomed in close, giving the action a personal touch. Those are the broad strokes, but during our time at Santa Monica Studio, we dug deeper by playing the game, getting a clear sense of the new vision for God of War's combat.

ALL ABOUT OPTIONS

Kratos and Atreus encounter a group of draugr – undead warriors – in a rocky clearing. Kratos enters the fray by throwing his axe (named Leviathan) at one of the smaller foes, freezing it in place. He then sprints toward a heavy draugr to deliver a series of melee attacks using a shield and his fists, all while Atreus peppers the battlefield with arrows from afar. The heavy is undeterred by the onslaught, so Kratos commands

THE STORY SO FAR

We know God of War's story focuses on the journey of Kratos and Atreus, but how does it begin, and where are they going? As of this writing, Santa Monica Studio has not revealed those details. The only hint we got during our playtime was a two-line exchange, in which Atreus says, "I still don't understand why that man attacked you at our house." Kratos responds: "I told you, boy. I know nothing more of it." Beyond that, fans will just have to speculate for the moment.

One thing we do know is the previous games' structure isn't just being recycled with a new pantheon. "The Greek era of God of War games, starting out, were not necessarily about Kratos going around killing every god in the realm one by one," says creative director Cory Barlog. "By the end, in God of War III, that's what we kind of ended up doing. And you can really only get away with that once. That's definitely not how I want to start a new journey, with Kratos killing a bunch of gods like a hit list."

Atreus to focus his fire on it. Their coordinated attacks stun the creature, allowing Kratos to deliver a brutal coup de grâce. As the remaining enemies converge, Leviathan magically flies back into Kratos' hand, tripping one of the draugr on its return. Holding the axe aloft, an icy area-of-effect blast staggers the encroaching undead, giving Kratos a moment to roll away. He then advances on the group from a new angle, swinging Leviathan in a series of light and heavy attacks that fling the draugr in the air and knock them against walls until the threat is vanquished.

Even a basic combat scenario like this is clearly different from the God of War fans know, and it has a surprising number of variables. In the same situation, you could lean more heavily on Atreus' support. You could throw the axe more. You could have an ability other than the ice blast equipped. You could get in a tight spot and decide to trigger your Spartan rage. Whichever way the encounter plays out, Santa Monica Studio has ensured you have plenty of choices to make beyond how hard you mash the attack buttons.

"Kratos of old had always been a power fantasy," says lead gameplay designer Jason McDonald. "He had these crazy chains that would just wipe out tons of enemies at once, launching them all in the air, and you'd feel really strong. With this new God of War, in trying to ground Kratos a little bit more and change the mythology, change his weapon, and change everything, was finding a way to modernize the idea that he's still a power fantasy. He's still really strong – but he does it now with a more tactical or strategic standpoint."

In other words, Kratos is still master of the battlefield, but his ideal path to victory is more deliberate than it has been in the past. Focusing on the right enemies, deploying different kinds of crowd control, and being mindful of your surroundings are more important than ever. "These kinds of strategic choices are something we've always been missing in God of War," Barlog says. "You kind of just went: 'Big guy there, small guy there,' and you just attacked. The chain blades leaned into this concept of a flurry of chaos all around you. Now we have more decision-making."

Gamers hear the term "player choice" so often that it starts to lose significance, but during our hands-on demo, we saw how the team is making it meaningful in God of War. We fought revenants that dodged all of Kratos' melee attacks, ice-infused humanoids resistant to Leviathan's strikes, and an enormous ogre that seemed impossible to stagger. When tricky foes like these are combined in a single encounter, you have to decide which ones you prioritize and how you take them down – a process possible by the varied arsenal at your disposal.

CHANGING BLADES

For longtime fans of God of War, the most surprising shift in the new game is Kratos' new weapons. His Blades of Chaos were iconic and central to the feel and fluidity of combat in previous titles. Now, Kratos wields an axe and shield instead – ancient weapons forged by dwarven smiths.

The telescoping shield (which has a name the team isn't sharing yet) is an effective piece of utility equipment. It delivers stunning melee blows (more on that later), and expands when players hold L1 to block. The area we played in our demo was only about one hour from the beginning, but in that time, the shield felt more like a cosmetic accent than a fully featured weapon.

Leviathan, on the other hand, is the centerpiece of your combat strategy. The axe has light and heavy attacks, which are your standard methods of inflicting damage. Kratos generally keeps his feet planted on the ground as he fights; the stylish aerial maneuvers of past games are gone, but he can still launch enemies into the air with a heavy attack. This robs them of their defense and makes them more vulnerable, even if Kratos doesn't take to the sky with them.

Kratos can throw the axe at any time and summon it back with the press of the triangle button. Tossing aside your primary weapon may seem ridiculous, but we did it frequently to take advantage of its range and ability to freeze certain enemies on impact.

"A lot of our big guys, they have precision targets on their bodies," McDonald says. "If you throw the axe at an ogre's head, certain times that's a good thing, because it'll get him stunned. And throwing at enemies' heads in particular is usually a good thing – even a normal draugr, a small little guy, because it will spin them around and expose their back."

You won't always be throwing the axe with the aim of inflicting direct damage. In our encounter against an ogre, the battlefield was littered with fiery containers; we won the fight by luring the beast close to the containers, then rolling away and tossing Leviathan at the objects to trigger an explosion.

As we explored a mountainous area, we ran across a chest inscribed with three runes. To open it, we searched the environment to find hidden stones with corresponding markings. They were all out of reach, but by throwing our axe to shatter the stones, we unlocked the chest to claim the crafting materials inside.

Throwing Leviathan is also a great way to keep your distance from dangerous enemies. While the shield works well for parrying and blocking regular attacks, some foes have unblockable moves (currently represented by a red flash before they attack). If those enemies also happen to be difficult to stagger, close-range combat becomes a tricky affair; interrupting them is difficult, and their attacks are harder to avoid. The first time we encountered a lone heavy draugr in a cave, it killed us. The second time, we threw the axe then instantly recalled it multiple times – a tactic that took the creature down before it even got within striking distance.

"Every time we put this in someone's hands, the first thing you see everybody doing is just throwing the axe constantly," McDonald says. "And after hours and hours of doing that, no one seems tired of it. So, I definitely feel like it has reached that polish level where it feels like this is Kratos' new weapon. It has a different feel than the blades used to have, but it has a feel of its own."

Based on our demo, we can support that statement. You can practically feel the heft as you send Leviathan spinning toward foes, and the impact as it rockets back into Kratos' hand is remarkably satisfying. Using it to chop through bad guys is rewarding, and it functions as a powerful central concept around which your other combat options orbit.

OTHER WEAPONS?

In previous God of War games, Kratos usually adds to his arsenal with additional weapons, including swords, gauntlets, hammers, and spears. Sony Santa Monica is pointedly not saying anything about whether Kratos earns any new equipment along those lines — an evasion that implies the game still holds secrets in that area. Even so, the only thing lead gameplay designer Jason McDonald would say on the subject is: "The axe and shield are definitely the stars of the show."

A GOD'S TOOLS

During what Santa Monica Studio calls the "Greek era" of God of War, players didn't have much control over Kratos' progression. You could choose the order in which you improved your abilities and weapons, but at the end of those games, each player's Kratos was essentially the same. Now, in the Norse era, you have more freedom to experiment and develop an approach that works for you.

"As you're exploring the game and finding all of these things, you're really able to reconfigure and say, 'I really want this and this, and this is going to be effective for me,'" Barlog says. "Your style of play allows you to outfit Kratos however you want to cater to that. And we are using a good portion of the game to continue allowing the player to open up and change that style of play."

One of the major ways you can customize your moveset is through runes. These powerful items can be slotted into Leviathan – one associated with your light attack, and one with heavy. Each one enables the use of a unique special move, like the previously mentioned ice blast. However, they can have other properties and ranges, including conical area-of-effect and direct fire. Elements like the range, duration, and cooldown vary depending on whether the runic attack is light or heavy.

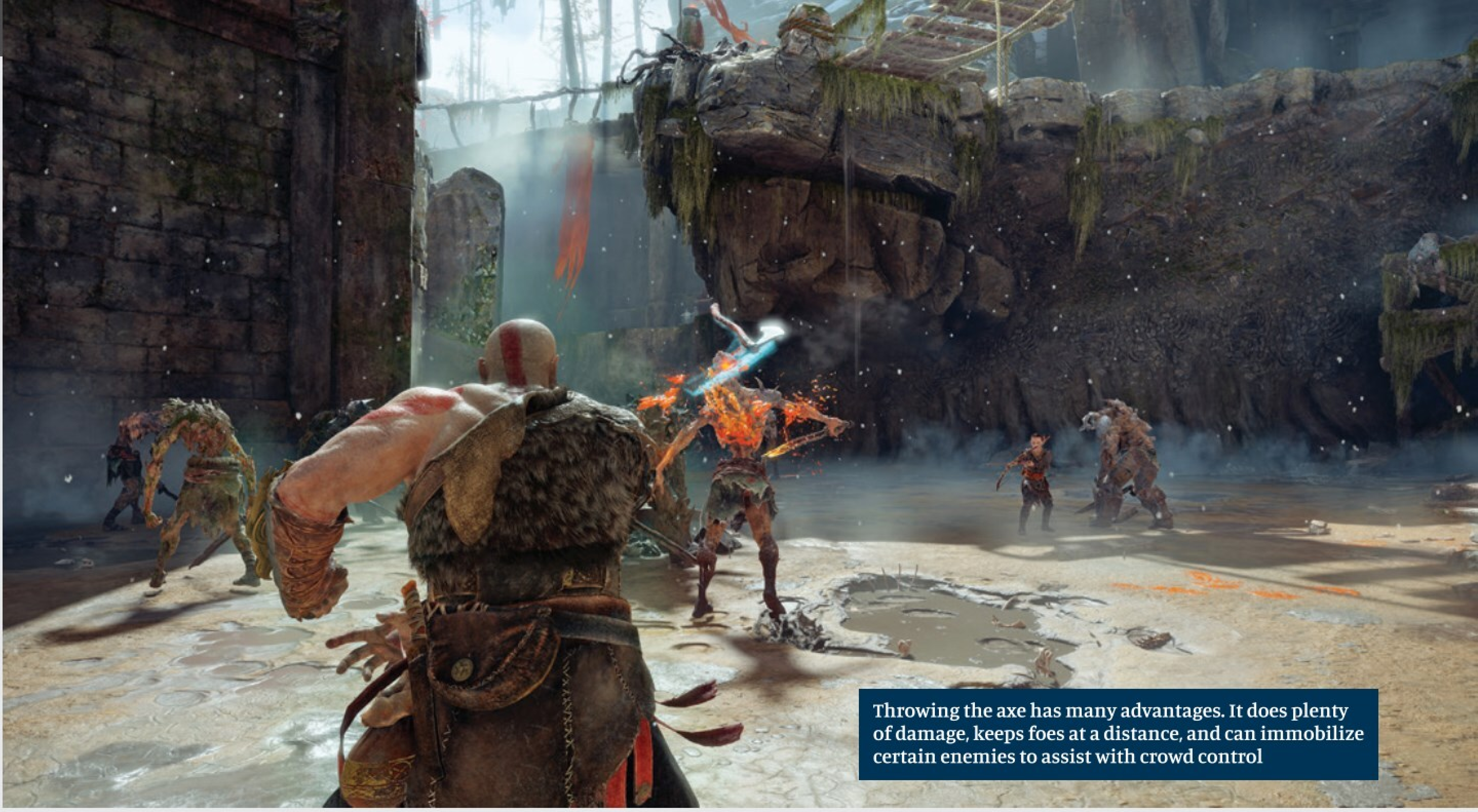
Because you can only have two runes slotted at a time, you need to make choices about which ones are best suited to your play style. You can swap them around and try new combinations, but you also need to make decisions about which ones to improve. "Each one of them begins with a base set of stats, but as you go through the game, you'll be able to get stuff to upgrade the multiple levels," Barlog says. "You'll have tons of different attacks."

Speaking of different attacks, Spartan rage returns in this installment. As before, it is tied to a meter that fills gradually as you fight, though it functions in a new way once you activate it. Kratos' moveset changes, and he exclusively dishes out savage and powerful bare-handed attacks. While Spartan rage is not as consistently available as Kratos' other moves, it still provides an interesting option in combat; it is great for getting you out of tight spots, and the earth-shaking power of Kratos' blows makes it fun to control. "In this mode, he starts to resemble more of what he used to be in terms of how far he can knock guys away, how strong he really is," McDonald says. "We really wanted him to put the shield away and just go raw fists and show that super-human strength he's still capable of."

Players have yet another avenue to make choices about Kratos' appearance and capabilities: his armor. New pieces are created (or upgraded) through a crafting system, then equipped in a handful of available slots. Unfortunately, the team was tight-lipped about the specific mechanics of crafting during our visit. However, crafting resources are clearly being used as an incentive for exploration; during our playtime, most of the chests we found contained hacksilver, which is a key component in almost every recipe.

Most of these elements (among others) can be improved by spending XP, which you also use to buy new skills. While the details of that skill system are still under wraps, the fragments we saw point to players having vast possibilities for creative combat at their fingertips.

Kratos versus a group of regular humans is not even a remotely fair match up. Whatever happened since the previous installments, Kratos is still a god



Throwing the axe has many advantages. It does plenty of damage, keeps foes at a distance, and can immobilize certain enemies to assist with crowd control

RAISING ATREUS

Even with all of Kratos' special abilities and unique equipment, the most meaningful addition to his repertoire is Atreus. Because Kratos is a god, the assistance of a child might not seem significant, but Atreus creates several new layers that deepen the experience.

In terms of combat, think of Atreus as an extension of Kratos rather than an A.I. companion. You don't need to babysit him, and he doesn't get in your way. "From the beginning, I wanted to make sure we weren't making an escort-mission game – one where you're constantly feeling like the A.I. messed you up," Barlog says.

During development, the team experimented with several approaches to making Atreus an empowering presence; the goal was to have him enhance Kratos' capabilities without becoming a liability or stealing all of the kills. The solution was to give Atreus two levels of participation in battle: actions he takes automatically, and those that you command him to perform with a press of the square button (which is used solely for this purpose).

"Dealing with all of these moving parts at the same time was challenging," says gameplay engineering lead Jeet Shroff. "As we went through it, dedicating a button to Atreus was a key component, because now we could control a lot of what was autonomous and what wasn't."

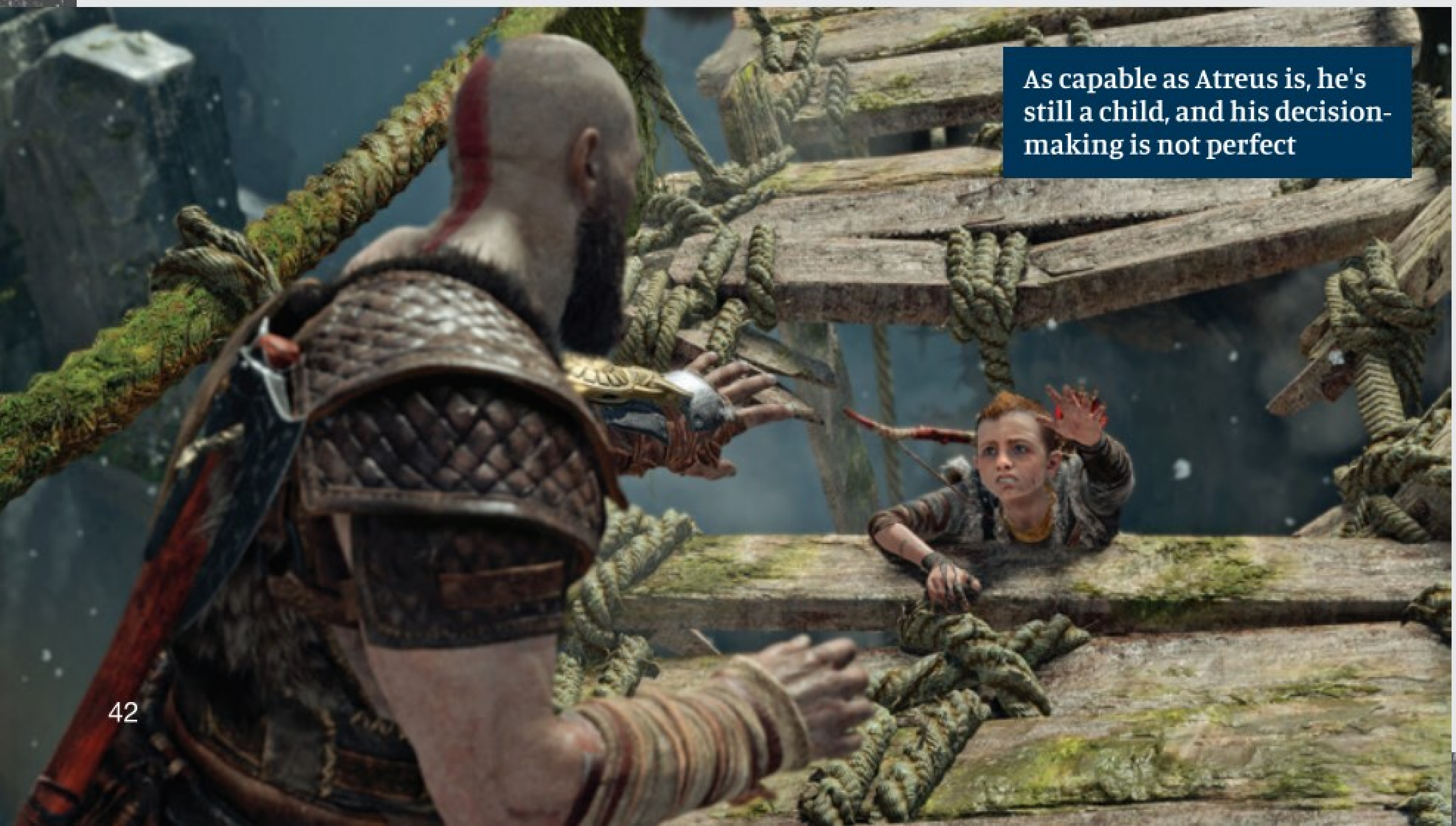
If you are wading into a horde of enemies, Atreus will stand back and fire arrows without any input from you. However, if you want his assistance with a specific enemy, you only need to tap the button to focus his fire. Using Atreus' ranged attacks may sound like an easy way to cruise through encounters, but there's a catch: His arrows don't have much effect on enemies' health. Instead, he dishes out higher amounts of stun damage, which is another new mechanic to God of War.

Enemies have two different meters displayed above them: One is health, and the other is stun. Using Leviathan is the surest way to do real damage, but Kratos' fists and Atreus' arrows fill up the stun meter faster. For weak enemies, chopping through them is probably more efficient than stunning. However, using the stun mechanic is critical for taking out stronger foes, as well as managing encounters with a variety of enemy types.

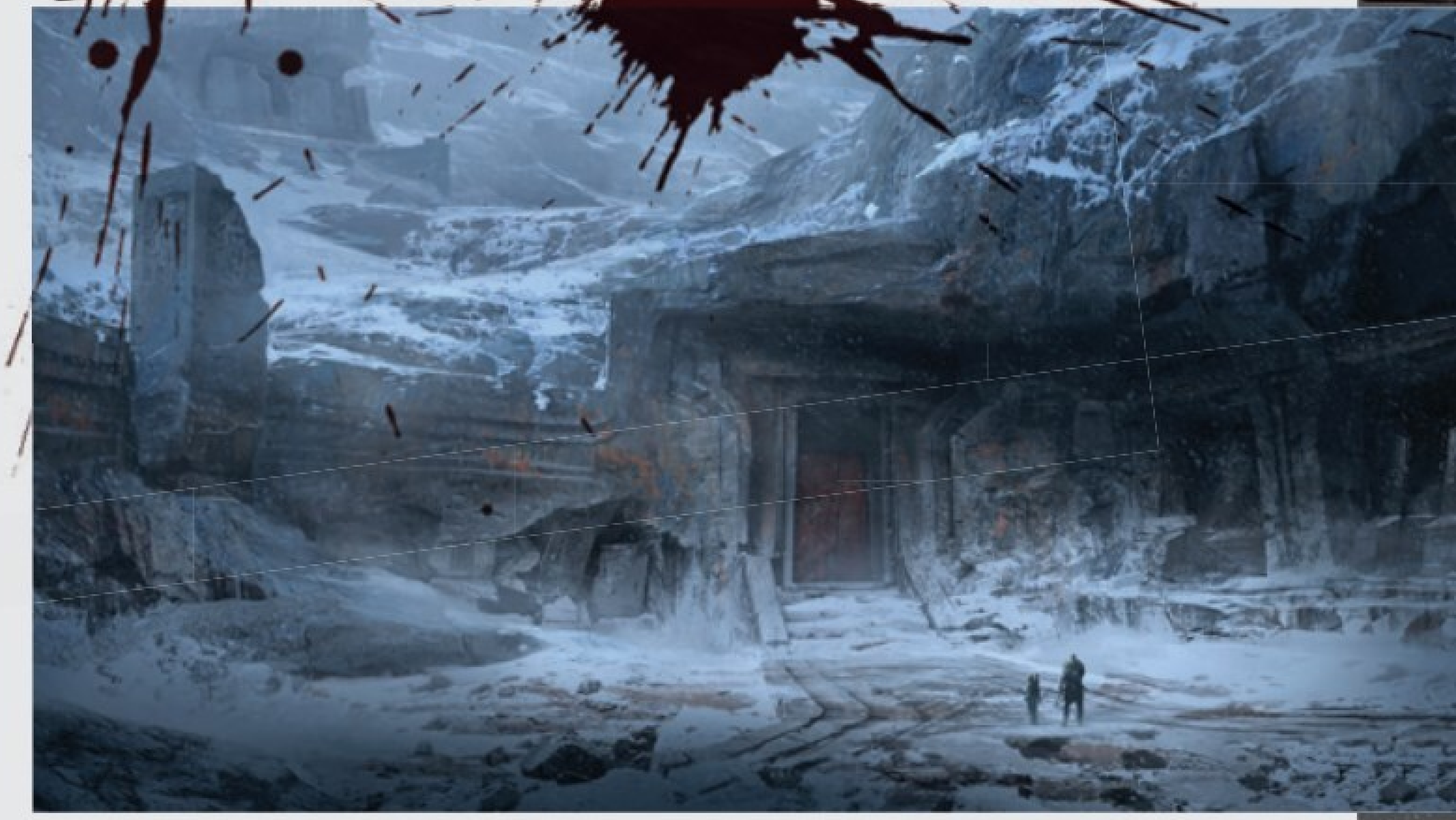
Once a foe's stun meter is full, a grab prompt appears. In some cases, a grab might just mean Kratos rips the creature apart. However, it's more than just a quick-kill option; other enemies may present tactical advantages after they've been stunned. "When you grab an enemy, you can weaponize him to hit other enemies in the field," McDonald says. "Depending on the enemy – we have different grabs for every enemy – you might want to stun him, and that stun might allow you to grab him and throw him into other enemies. Or slam him into the ground and lift them all into the air – things that let you set up the crowd control you need to survive."

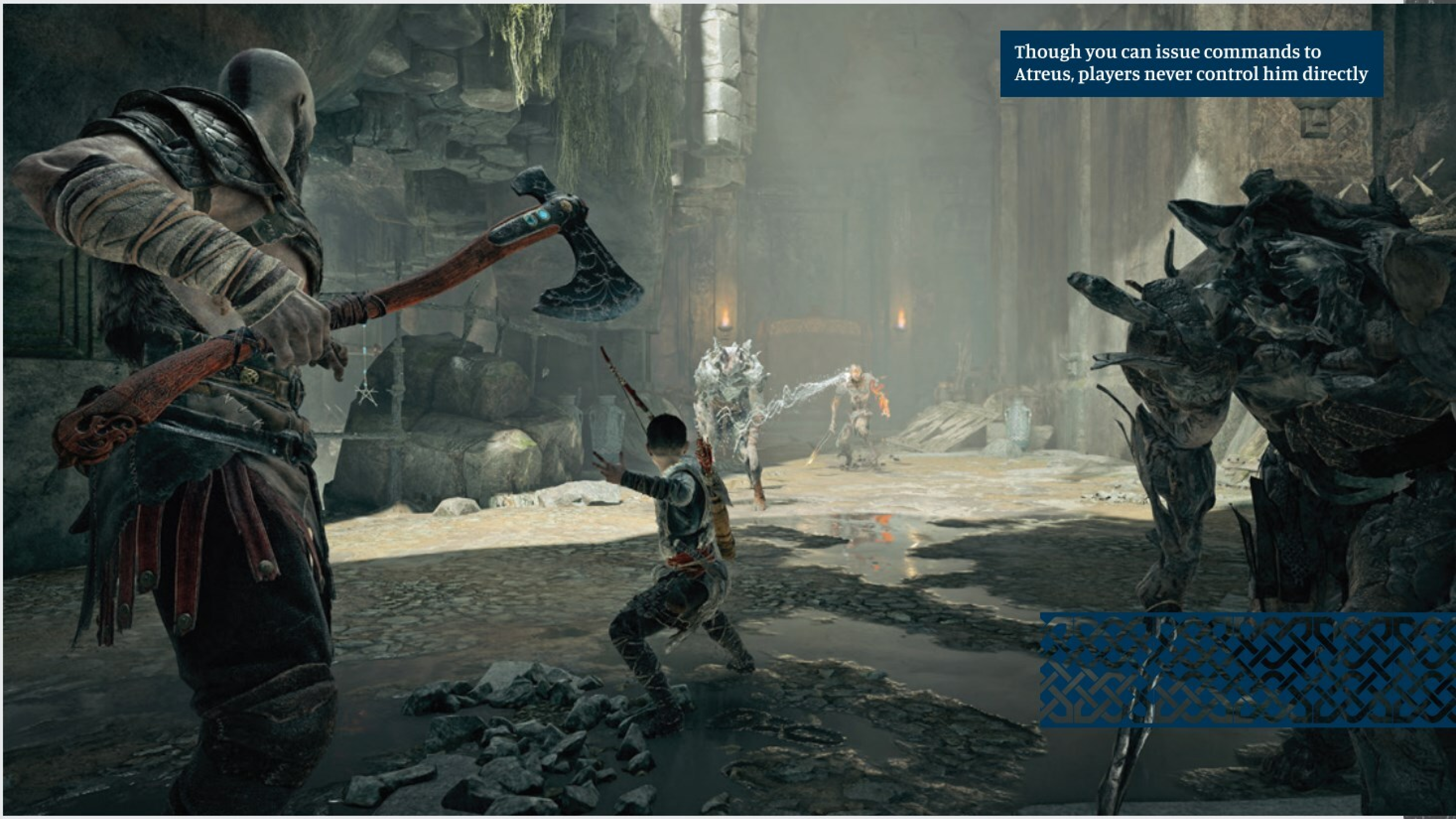
This means frequent and deliberate use of Atreus is incredibly valuable in battle. Setting up stuns helps clear the battlefield and manage the flow of encounters. For example, if you have two similar enemies in front of you, you might focus on one while commanding Atreus to focus on the other; not only does this keep both enemies from ganging up on you, but by the time you're finished with your target, Atreus' opponent could be stunned and ready for a grab. On the other hand, if Atreus attracts the attention of too many enemies, the direst consequence is he gets knocked out for the remainder of the battle, leaving you without his assistance.

Atreus' suite of abilities changes and improves as you progress. He acquires



As capable as Atreus is, he's still a child, and his decision-making is not perfect





Though you can issue commands to Atreus, players never control him directly

new skills, armor, and special moves you can equip. "We still want to expand Kratos' toolbox," Barlog says. "I think Atreus is an expansion on that, the ability to outfit him and change his special moves as well allows you to mix and match everything up." While the team wasn't going into much detail beyond that, it seems like upgrading Atreus is one of the deepest and most significant ways to increase Kratos' power.

With all of the possibilities Atreus adds, the full view of combat starts coming into focus, as well as the variety of choices players can make. When choosing your targets, you want to consider their difficulty, as well as their health and stun levels. You can thin the opposition by ordering Atreus to set up grabs while you handle more imposing foes. Some enemies might be resistant to certain attacks, so you need to weigh the best way to split your efforts. Plus, different players' approach to any situation might be altered by the runes they have slotted or the gear they have equipped. Whatever methods you prefer, you have the freedom to balance all of these considerations to develop a unique play style.

The options may seem overwhelming, but the studio is committed to making that depth understandable for all types of players. "We still retain the pick-up-and-play accessibility that God of War was always well-known for," Studstill says. The combat may be harder to master than it was before, but you don't need to optimize your efficiency to jump in and have a good time.

VIEWING THE ACTION

When Kratos is in battle, players will undoubtedly notice his new array of abilities. However, another element that has a profound effect on God of War's action is the new camera. For the first time in the series, players have full control over their view of Kratos and his surroundings, but the perspective stays close to Kratos to make the adventure feel more grounded and intimate.

While new camera angles may not sound like the flashiest feature, the subtle impact (and technical prowess required to pull it off) is no small matter. "For us, it was a better choice because of the feeling it creates," Shroff says. "The way you are able to experience this world and everything in it: the combat, the narrative, the cinematics.

Fighting a massive creature with this camera, that close, seeing each attack – it is a very different experience from being zoomed-out far away. Those are things we leaned into. We got very unique gameplay coming out of this choice."

During our hands-on time, the new perspective imbued the combat with a more personal touch. The weight of the weapons, the thrill of a close dodge, and the imposing size of an enormous ogre are all conveyed in a powerful way. But God of War also uses another visual technique to get players invested in Kratos' journey: The camera doesn't cut.

Whether you're transitioning between areas, going from gameplay to cutscenes, or delivering a dramatic final blow, the entire game is treated as one continuous shot. The result is a sense that, like Kratos, players don't get respite or reprieve from the harsh world.

"We all watch movies, we all watch TV," says director of photography Dori Azari. "And we're used to a certain way of delivering a visual narrative. You look at this, and something happens. You look at that, and something happens. Then five hours pass, and something happens. It's all based on cuts. Our minds start to wrap around storytelling in terms of cuts. That's how we're educated."

The team says God of War is about 25 to 35 hours long. Over that span, players may stop consciously noticing the no-cut camera (if they even notice it in the first place), but the hope is its effects continue to shape the experience (even if they can't be clearly identified) by conveying intimacy, personality, and a sense of proximity to the drama.

"The idea of not cutting the camera away is one of those things that I think cinematography nerds and hardcore game-design people will point out – and that I will never stop pointing out – but most people likely won't comment on," Barlog says. "But it will be one of those things that is felt."

NEW APPROACH TO NARRATIVE

What are the signature elements of God of War? In the mid-2000s, gamers probably wouldn't mention sophisticated storytelling; they'd talk about flashy action, screams of rage, and hidden orgies. Today, the answer is different. While combat still takes center stage, Santa Monica Studio wants to elevate the narrative while leaving the antiquated pieces behind. The fans who loved God of War when it first released are now older, and many of their tastes have changed with age. "I think we inherently knew the franchise needed to evolve in that emotional beat and be something meatier for the older generation of gamers," Studstill says.

Since the planning phases of God of War, the goal has been one of transformation – turning Kratos from a one-dimensional engine of destruction into a more nuanced and interesting character. "Audiences were much more ready for the flawed and real depiction of people," Barlog says. "I think they're getting bored of the Teflon concept."

Delving too deep on the subject of story would spoil the experience, but it's enough to say that the vision for Kratos is closely tied to his role as a father. In previous games, his family was more of a device to justify his fury. In this entry, his interactions with his son reveal much about the person he was, is, and wants to be.

"There's kind of an aspect of the early life of him and Atreus when Kratos is struggling to understand how to relate to him," Barlog says. "[Kratos] did not grow up in a way that helped him relate very well, and yet he was able to relate to his daughter fairly well. And that turned out very poorly. So I think after that incident, everything that's happened in the entirely of the Greek era of games shut him down as a human. His humanity basically became this brick wall."

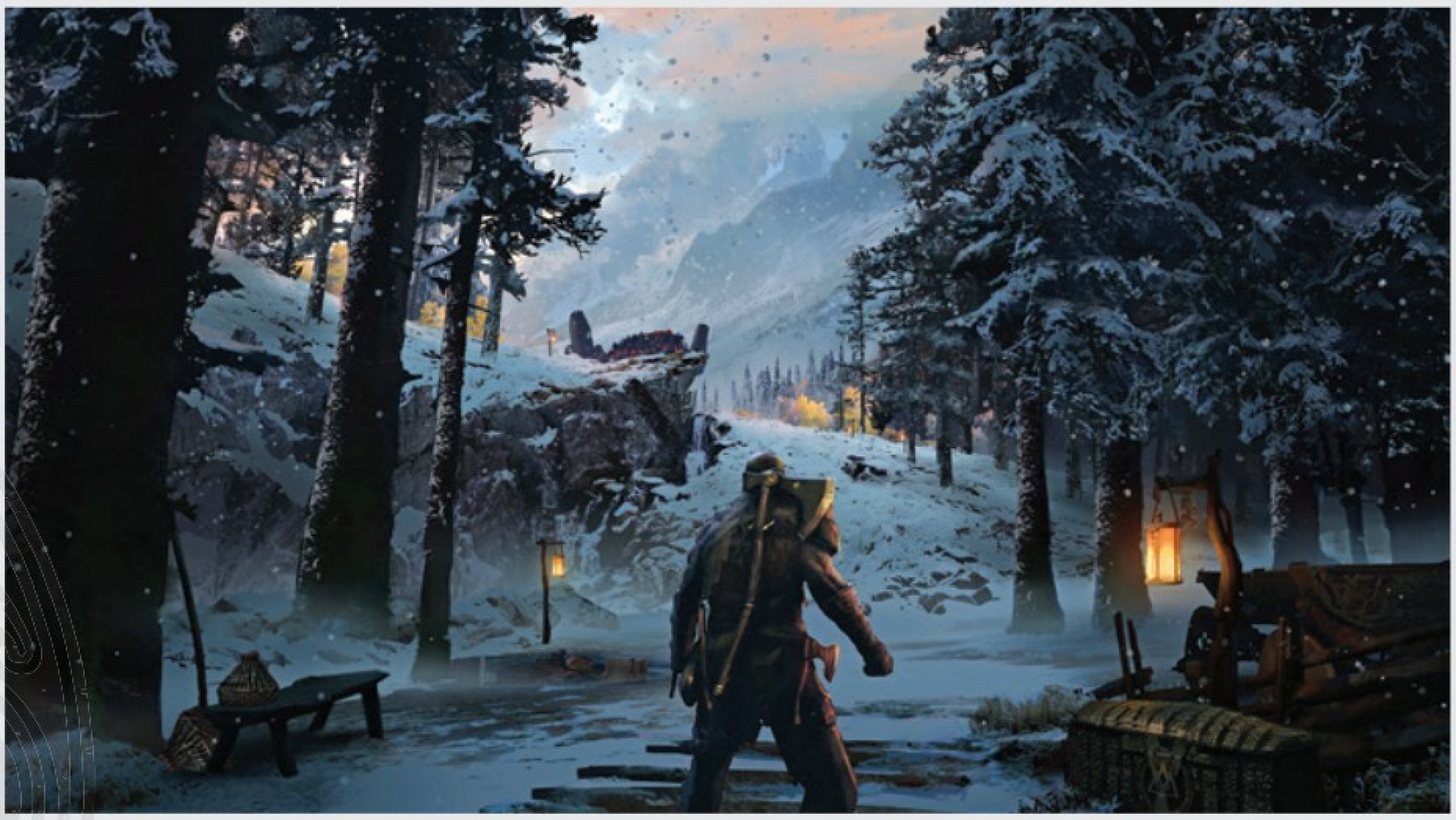
Through the course of their journey, Kratos makes an earnest effort to break down that wall and be a father to his son. He tries to contain his anger, teach, reassure, and console – but he makes mistakes along the way,

SETTING SAIL

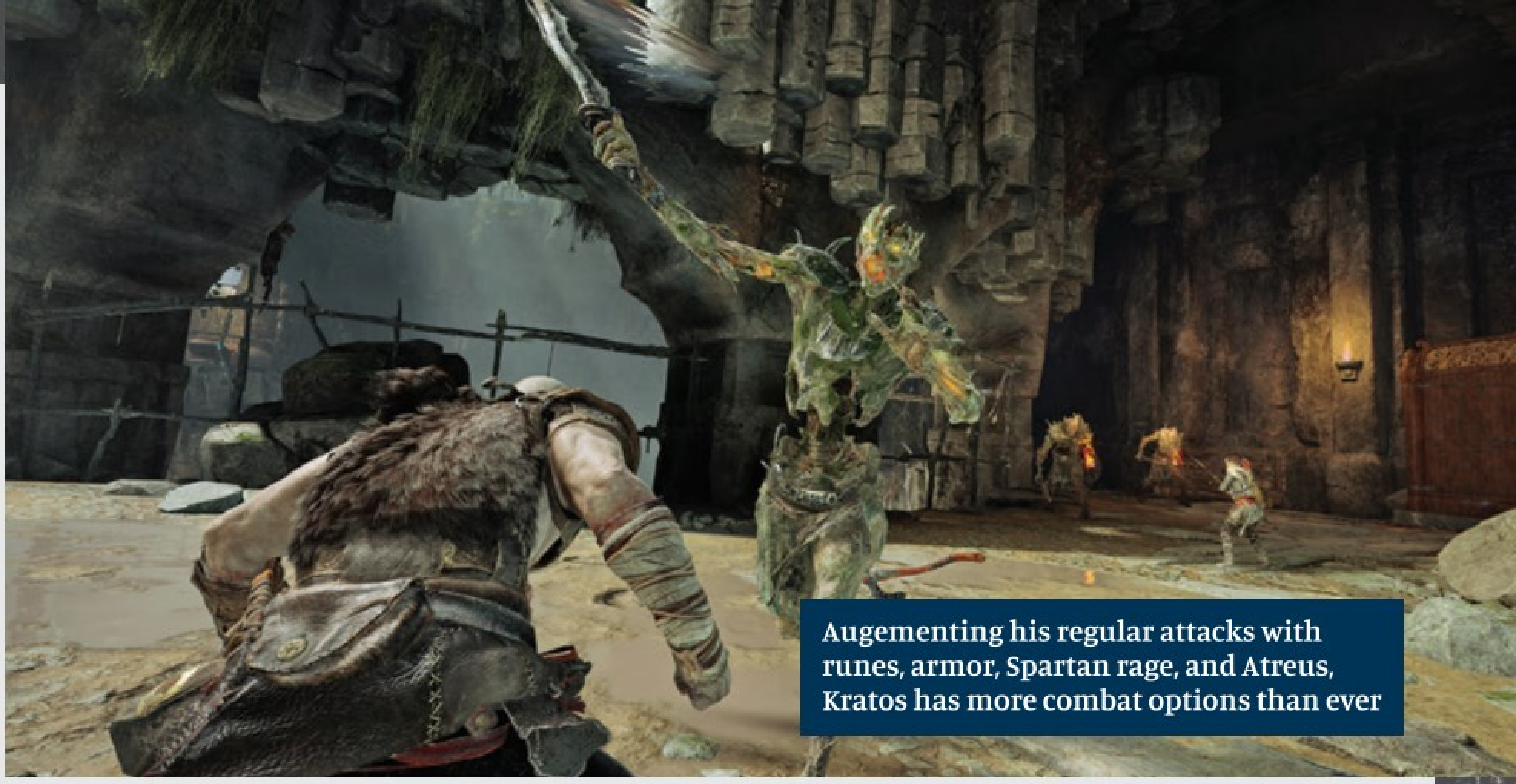
In trailers for God of War, we've seen Kratos and Atreus travelling by boat. Though this feature was initially born out of necessity (since swimming was no longer part of exploration), the concept evolved into a unique way to bundle traversal and story.

"I started investigating this idea of a big Viking longboat, and then realized you could really continue the narrative throughout," says creative director Cory Barlog. "You can slow traversal down and you can change the pacing and interaction style and point of view. All while having these moments that you probably couldn't get in any other situations."

Boats are generally present whenever the player has cause to use them. Kratos and Atreus are not attached to one particular vessel; they find many different boats as they move from place to place.



just like any parent. Barlog does not disguise the fact that many interactions and ideas surrounding Kratos and Atreus are drawn from his own relationship with his son. "I needed to make it a bit more personal," Barlog says. "Having worked with a bunch of people over the four or five years I was wandering the Earth [after God of War II], I had started to realize that so many common themes came up with all the great directors and writers I was meeting with. Every one of them was saying the same thing: 'Find a personal way in.'"


Augementing his regular attacks with runes, armor, Spartan rage, and Atreus, Kratos has more combat options than ever

Even if Kratos seems to have trouble dealing with fatherhood, gamers can rest assured that some of his struggles are grounded in reality. At the very least, everyone playing God of War had parental figures (or are possibly parents themselves), so the subject matter is easier to connect with and relate to than the concept of exacting revenge on Olympus. Kratos may be a god, but that doesn't mean he can't be humanized.

THE FUTURE

With the God of War's release almost upon us (as of this writing, the team would not get more specific than "early 2018"), everyone at Santa Monica Studio seems focused on getting the new game into players' hands. However, amid all the talk of reinvention rests the implication of more God of War titles to come – the possibilities of new eras and pantheons in Kratos' future. "The Greek games were the Greek era of God of War," Barlog says. "Moving on, the next mythological belief system he interacts with became the Norse era of God of War. But we may end up going on to the Egyptian era and the Mayan era and so on and so forth."

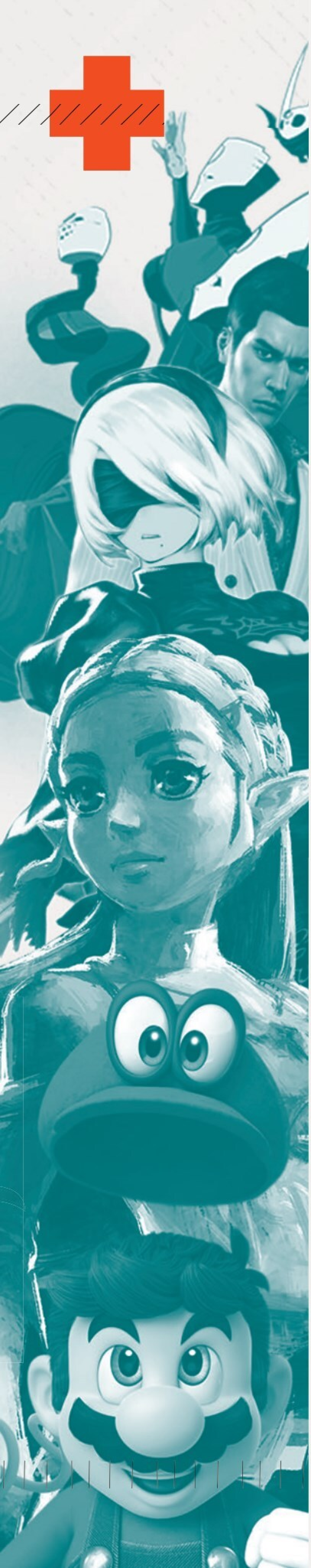
Even so, don't start placing your bets on the next era quite yet. After all, Sony took some convincing to make even this game happen. "A lot of people throughout the organization wanted [God of War] to sleep and rest," Studstill says. Barlog adds: "Even the first pitches I gave, there was that, 'You've really got to convince me that we should do another one.'"

In short, much rests on Santa Monica Studio's ability to present a new and compelling vision for God of War that will set the franchise on a new path. While this installment acknowledges the series' past, it also builds on new foundations that welcome a wide array of players – not just fans of previous entries. "To me, that was important, because I really think we needed to have a much bigger audience," Barlog says. "I want this to reach a lot of people; I want this to be on the level of the Uncharteds and the Assassin's Creeds. We want to grow this franchise big time."

While Kratos could eventually reach that point in his journey, the next few steps are critical. Based on our time with the game, a glance toward the horizon certainly seems justified.

Go to gameinformer.com/godofwar for a month of exclusive God of War features, including interviews, concept art, and more info on the game's reimagined combat system

The Top
50
Games Of
2017



P

Political turmoil, mass shootings, natural disasters – almost any way you cut it, 2017 was a bummer. That tumult spilled into video games as well. Predatory microtransactions spoiled otherwise great games. Studios that made beloved games like Dead Space and Torchlight closed their doors. The well-regarded Mass Effect and Star Wars Battlefront franchises both faltered.

But if you looked past the gloom and doom, parting those dark clouds revealed a much more vibrant and wonderful side of the video games industry. Nintendo released the handheld/console hybrid Switch, which became the hottest gadget of 2017 and convinced previously disinterested third-party publishers it would be foolish to ignore the burgeoning platform. The publisher's triumphs continued with one of the best game lineups we've ever seen during the first year of a console launch. Despite facing sky-high expectations, both Mario and Zelda took risks with new entries that ultimately surprised, delighted, and entertained.

Success expanded beyond Nintendo as well. Microsoft joined the 4K gaming arms race with the most powerful console we've ever experienced. PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds came out of nowhere, becoming the biggest phenomenon in gaming. Previously struggling franchises like Resident Evil and Assassin's Creed regained their footing with exciting new chapters. Independent games like What Remains of Edith Finch continued to push the boundaries of interactive storytelling, and experienced developers like Ninja Theory proved going indie doesn't mean you have to sacrifice triple-A production values.

Over the next 30 pages, we celebrate those incredible highs, pour some out for the new industry lows, and reveal which of the many amazing games from 2017 we deemed the best of the best.

by Game Informer Staff

Resident Evil 7: Biohazard

January 24 | PSVR • PS4 • Xbox One • PC

As the newest entry in a beloved series, Resident Evil 7 had a lot to prove to fans. Thankfully, this entry largely delivered, with tense survival horror gameplay that balanced vigorous boss fights, effective jump scares, and engaging puzzles. Resident Evil 7 builds upon its solid foundation and brings fresh ideas of its own. While it doesn't reinvent the franchise the way Resident Evil 4 did, this new entry's southern setting and full VR support still helped set it apart in unique ways.

Yakuza 0

January 24 | PS4

Sega's long-running series had its moment this year, with a stellar prequel that provides a starting-off point for newcomers and more underworld intrigue for fans. Yakuza 0 offers detailed recreations of '80s Tokyo and Osaka, with an abundance of optional content. Whether you choose to spend your time helping passersby or killing time (or rival gang members) in the arcades – something interesting is always going on in the game's seedy and silly world.

Nioh

February 7 | PS4 • PC

While Nioh may wear its Dark Souls inspiration on its sleeve, fast-paced and creative iterations on that combat system mixed with randomized loot and repeatable missions make for a deliciously difficult action/RPG trek through a demon-filled feudal Japan. Nioh is an excellent choice for those looking for big bosses to beat, weapon styles to explore, and tight, unforgiving action.

TOP 10 HEADLINES

Consumers Stand Against Predatory Microtransactions
Microtransactions have become more prevalent, but games such as Star Wars Battlefront II and NBA 2K18 crossed a line, and gamers eagerly grabbed their pitchforks to make it known.

02
#NetNeutrality

The FCC Guts Net Neutrality
This year marked the starting line for changes coming to the way we use the internet, and it doesn't look good for the consumer. 2018 should shed more light on the complicated issue.

EA Bungles New Star Wars Project, Closes Visceral
Plenty of fervor surrounded the single-player Star Wars game helmed by Uncharted's Amy Hennig, making EA's scrapping of it and dissolution of the studio disappointing.

E3 Opens Doors To The Public
For nearly its entire lifespan, E3 has been an exclusive show only open to trade and press. This year changed that by letting consumers experience it first-hand – for better or worse.

Andromeda Flops, Causing Leadership Changes
Mass Effect: Andromeda was a disappointment, leading to big changes. General manager Aaryn Flynn stepped aside, with Mass Effect 2 director Casey Hudson returning to BioWare.

For Honor

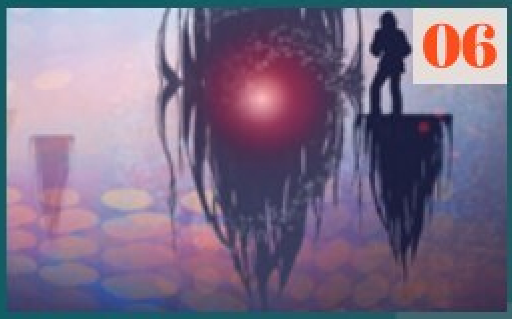
February 14 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

While technical problems plagued the early launch, Ubisoft deserves a lot of credit for taking a chance on the innovative systems and concepts behind For Honor. Boasting a skill-based combat system, the massive sieges and intimate duels have samurai, knights, and vikings going head-to-head in pitched battles we can't get enough of. Ubisoft Montreal has stood by the project in the months since release, improving performance and adding new playable characters, making us root for the game to get continued support.

Night In The Woods

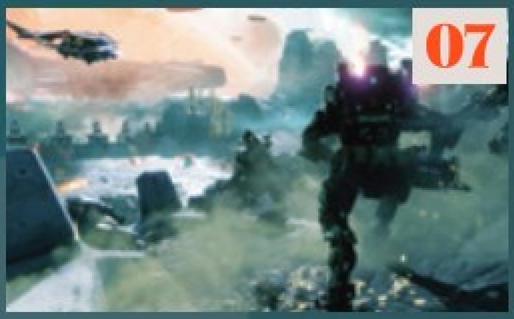
February 21 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Night in the Woods looks whimsical at first glance, with anthropomorphic animals and colorful environments, but it goes deeper and darker than its cartoonish aesthetic. As a 20-year-old college dropout named Mae, you return to your home and much has changed, from your friends' ambitions to the small town's troubling economy. In your attempt to rebuild friendships and find your place in the world, you battle mental health and other day-to-day struggles, making it a relatable experience.



Half-Life 3 Gets Unsatisfying Ending

The internet's favorite refrain is, "Where is Half-Life 3?" This year gave fans a bittersweet treat when designer and writer Marc Laidlaw, revealed plot details on the dead project.



EA Acquires Respawn

Titanfall's creators were already in cahoots with EA, but the publisher took their relationship to a new level when it purchased Respawn, leaving fans nervous about the potential impact on Titanfall 3.

08
NBA
2K
eLEAGUE

Pro Sports Buy Into Esports

This year marked a big step toward esports legitimacy and mainstream acceptance. NFL and NHL team owners invested in teams, while the NBA and Take-Two created their own eLeague.

09
Pokémon GO
FEST

Pokémon Go Fest Is A Big Disaster

Pokémon Go has been both a worldwide phenomenon and a disaster. Nothing encapsulated that better than the Pokémon Go Fest in Chicago, which forced Niantic to issue refunds.

10
STARFOX 2
TM

Canceled Star Fox 2 Gets Released

Star Fox 2 was ready to launch in 1996, but got canned in the face of the 3D revolution. Having it release on the SNES Classic finally let us see what we missed out on.

Nier: Automata

February 23 | PS4 • PC

Few games in 2017 had as much unbridled ambition as Nier's unexpected sequel. This sci-fi saga follows androids waging war on a dead Earth as they also ponder difficult questions like, "What does it mean to feel desire?" and "Does life have any meaning?" while uncovering a larger mystery surrounding humanity's absence in this bleak future. As heartbreaking as it is zany, Automata lives beyond its rough edges to tell one mind-bending, incredible story.

Torment: Tides Of Numenera

February 28 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC • Mac • Linux

Metaphysics and existential angst aren't exactly standard fare for most video games, but Torment's brilliant writing and fascinating world manage to pull off the complex messaging. Set a distant billion years beyond our reckoning, Torment embraces its weirdness through a fascinating isometric/RPG adventure about identity, memory, and consciousness, and serves as the perfect spiritual successor to the Planescape: Torment game that inspired it.

TOP 10 SUCCESSES

The Switch Reigns Supreme

After stumbling with the Wii U, Nintendo has another veritable hit on its hands. Not only does the Switch deliver on its hybrid promise, but its sales have been equally impressive.

02
PLAYERUNKNOWN'S
BATTLEGROUNDS

PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds Comes Out Of Nowhere

Who would've guessed an indie PC game could slay every triple-A shooter on the market? The Xbox port has its problems, but PUBG has earned its chicken dinner.

Japan Makes A Comeback

Who said Japanese game development is dead? Yakuza, Nier, and Persona all had huge years, and games like Monster Hunter: World and Mega Man 11 point to a great 2018 as well.

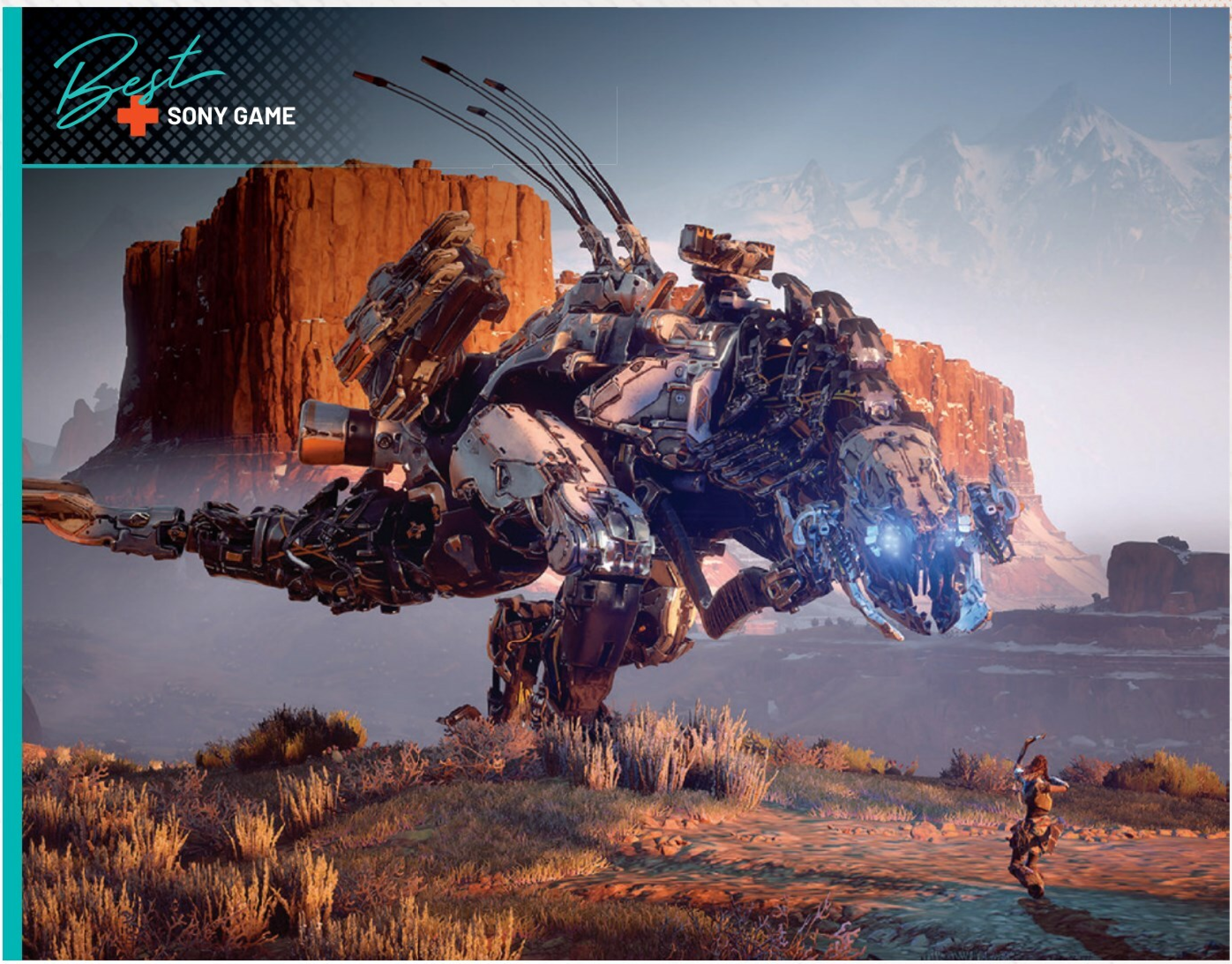
Diversity Keeps Improving

One look at our Top 10 Characters list proves developers are striving for more diversity in their games, and players from all walks of life are reaping the rewards.

05
grand theft auto V

GTA V Is The Best. Literally

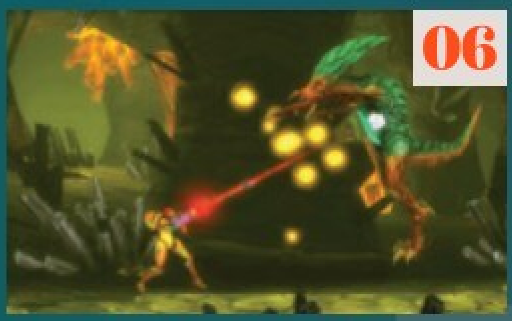
From a simple top-down 2D shooter to unparalleled open worlds, GTA has fulfilled its own rags-to-riches story. At over 85 million copies, GTA V is now the best-selling game of all-time in the U.S.



Horizon Zero Dawn

February 28 | PS4

Guerrilla's gamble on a new and ambitious open-world RPG paid off with a monumental exclusive for Sony. Horizon Zero Dawn delivers a wealth of gorgeous vistas and extremely satisfying combat, while also weaving in an intriguing plot. The secrets behind Aloy's origin as well as the fate of the world are doled out at a satisfying pace between the unforgettable battles with giant robotic beasts, making it one of our favorite experiences of the year.


06

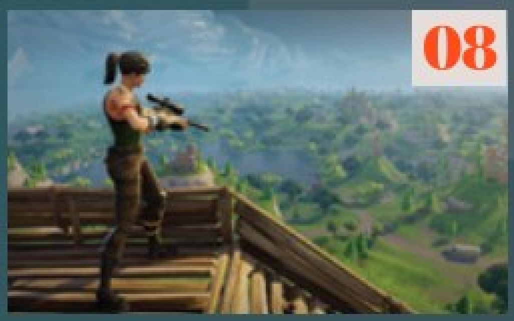
The Classics Killed It

If you grew up gaming in the '80s and '90s, 2017 was a good year. Players got great 2D revivals of Metroid and Sonic, and even greater incarnations of Zelda and Mario. Nostalgia FTW!

07

Indies Thrive On Switch

Unlike the oversaturated markets of other systems, the Switch has offered new life – and well-deserved success – to indies like Thimbleweed Park and The Flame in the Flood.


08

Fortnite's Battle Royale Pivot

Players didn't pay much attention to Fortnite's crafting-focused gameplay, until Epic introduced a PUBG-inspired battle royale mode. Now the innovative game is a hit. Whatever works!

09

Xbox One X Does 4K Support Right

"Mid-gen refresh" consoles get plenty of flak from gamers, but the Xbox One X delivered on its 4K promise regardless. The system's superior power paves the way for a gorgeous future.

10

Limited Run Gets Less Limited

Limited Run continued its worthy crusade this year with over 50 physical releases of downloadable games. Some great indies will outlive our current digital stores thanks to their work.

Game

OF THE YEAR

BEST NINTENDO GAME

BEST ACTION

The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild

March 3 | Switch • Wii U

The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild isn't just the best game this year – it's one of the best in years. Nintendo made a bold decision to re-evaluate the beloved formula established for 3D Zelda games by Ocarina of Time in 1998, but the gamble paid off. Nintendo rethought every element of Zelda, including how Link explores the world, collects items, and dresses. Every item needed to solve every puzzle is acquired before you even enter the larger open world.

Breath of the Wild offers a profound sense of exploration and shows a remarkable level of trust in the player. Every element of the game is self-directed and there are few, if any, instances where the game says no to the player. Want to run straight to Calamity Ganon and take him on with three hearts? Go for it. Want to grab that flying metal boomerang out of the air with your magnet tool and use it as a spinning blade weapon? Have at it. Want to just spend your day snowboarding on the alps of Hebra Mountain? Go!

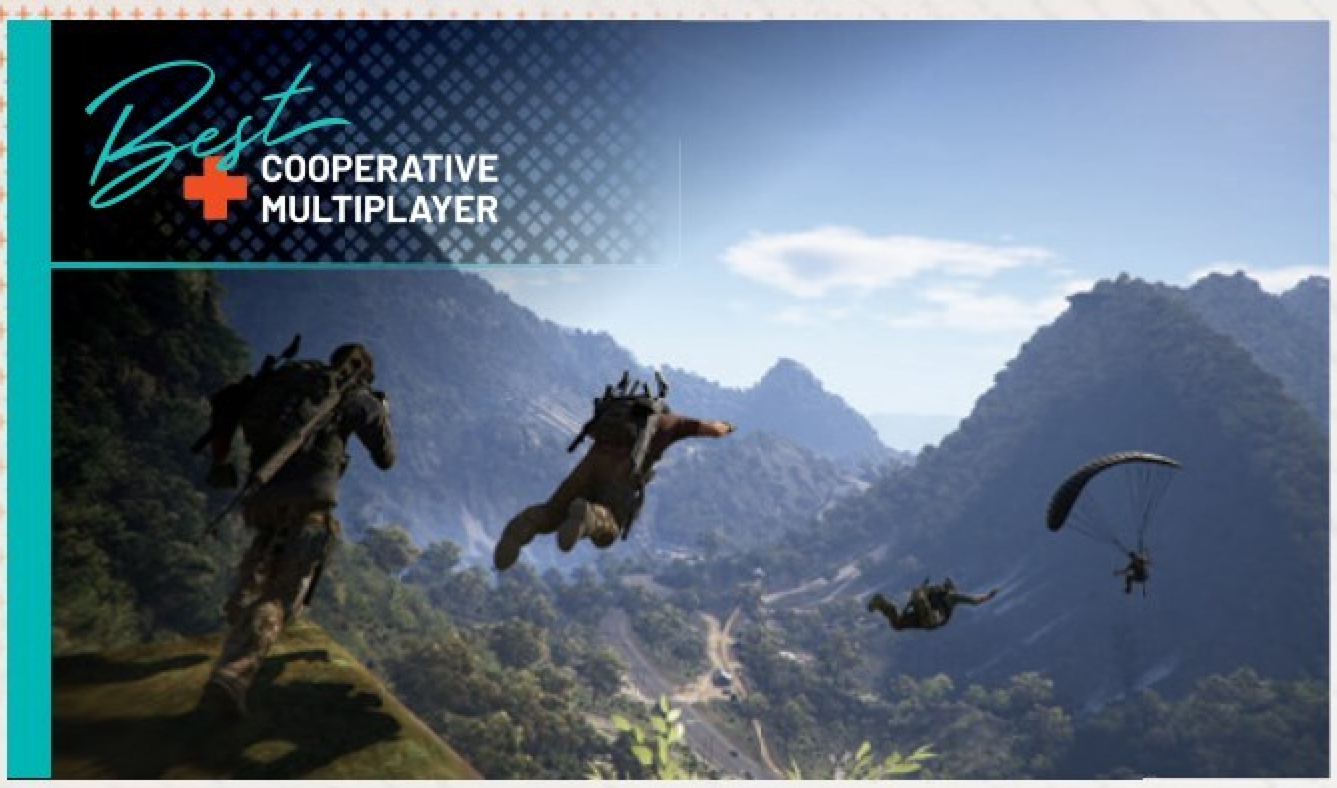
The ability to climb quite literally everything in the world of Hyrule means every path is one you establish on your own. Mountains aren't arbitrary walls, you can climb to their peaks to look out on the world and mark destinations without ever looking at the map. Breath of the Wild's Hyrule has an indefinable magic that demands your curiosity, and all without the all-too-familiar collectibles and checklists. Nintendo stripped down the genre it helped establish with the original Zelda to its essentials and focused on player freedom to phenomenal success.

The puzzles and combat also takes a cue from the massive world. With all the necessary tools for puzzle solving acquired before the game truly starts, every shrine and dungeon allows for multiple approaches. Shortly after release, the internet was flush with examples of how to solve nearly every puzzle in various different ways you may never have fathomed – and the same goes for combat, too. Going in sword swinging is a perfectly acceptable way to approach a fight, but so is using every element of the environment and the tools at your disposal. If you played Breath of the Wild, then you likely also had the experience of thinking something might work with some uncertainty, and being elated to discover that it absolutely did.

Even the story offers a surprising new take on relaying the narrative. Breath of the Wild examines a Hyrule where Link is not the perfect hero of time, able to overcome his foes without a second thought. He failed his mission to destroy his perpetual antagonist and is seeing the long-term effects of evil's hold on the world. We explored a Hyrule in the midst of a rebuild after a century of fear. We also witness Zelda become far more than a damsel in distress as the weight of her fate strained the relationship with both her father and Link. And like every other aspect of the game, if you don't want to engage in that element, you don't have to.

Of course, the game is not without its opponents here at Game Informer. In a banner year for video games, the debate was heated. Elements like breakable weapons, inconsistent rewards, and painstaking inventory management were panned. Despite those complaints, there is no denying the lasting impact Breath of the Wild will have on the industry moving forward. It serves as the starting line for Nintendo's return to success after the tepid response to the Wii U. The game sold more copies than Switch consoles, giving it an attach-rate of more than 100 percent in the first month of its release.

When we think back on 2017, Breath of the Wild is the defining experience of the year. Even ignoring the impressive legacy of the Zelda series and its importance to the video game industry, Breath of the Wild stands tall as a new high-mark for player freedom. It's more than just a new take on Zelda, it's a new take on open world and its impact will be felt for years to come.



Ghost Recon Wildlands

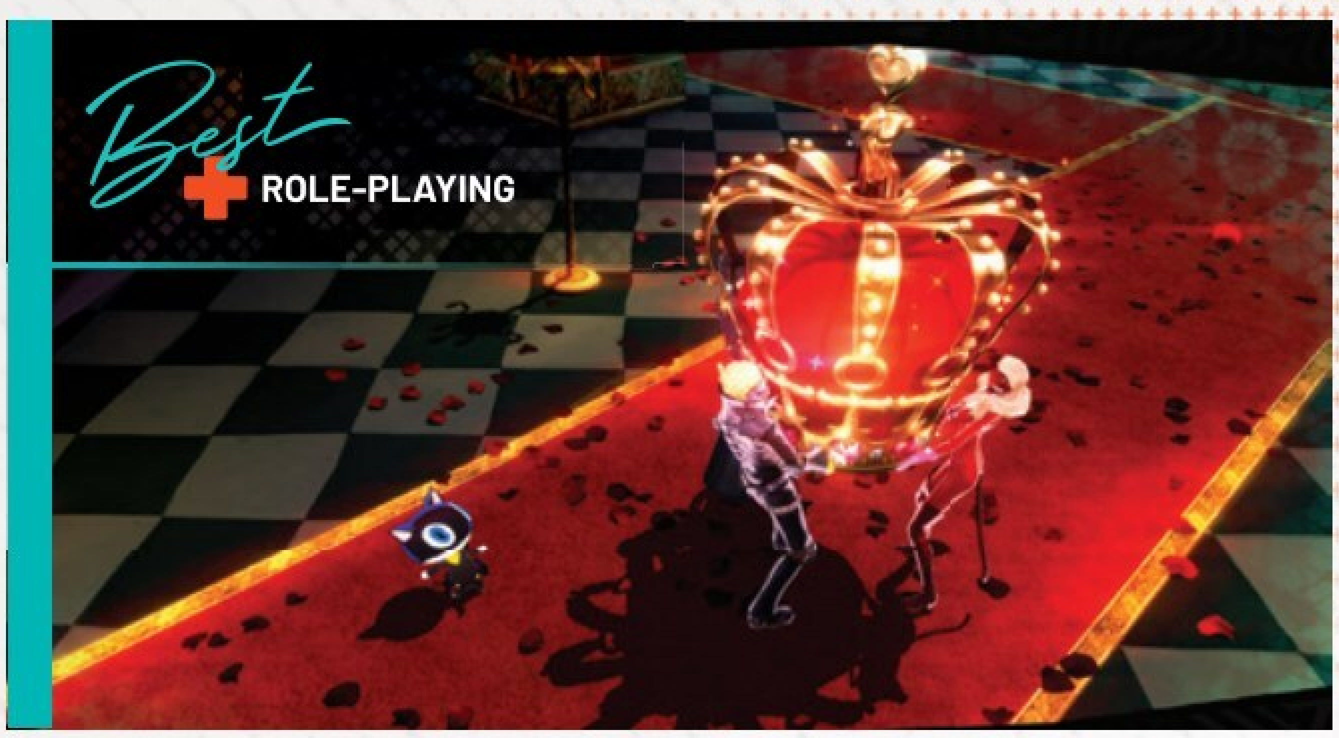
March 17 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Ubisoft scored a major win transitioning the Ghost Recon franchise into an open-world cooperative affair. Dropped into the cocaine crazed narco-state of Bolivia, your team of four can exercise caution and strategy to rip apart the invading Mexican cartel limb from limb, or you can Leeroy Jenkins your way through firefights. Both options are fun in their own right, as is exploring this vast and diverse country.

Thimbleweed Park

March 30 | PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC • iOS • Android

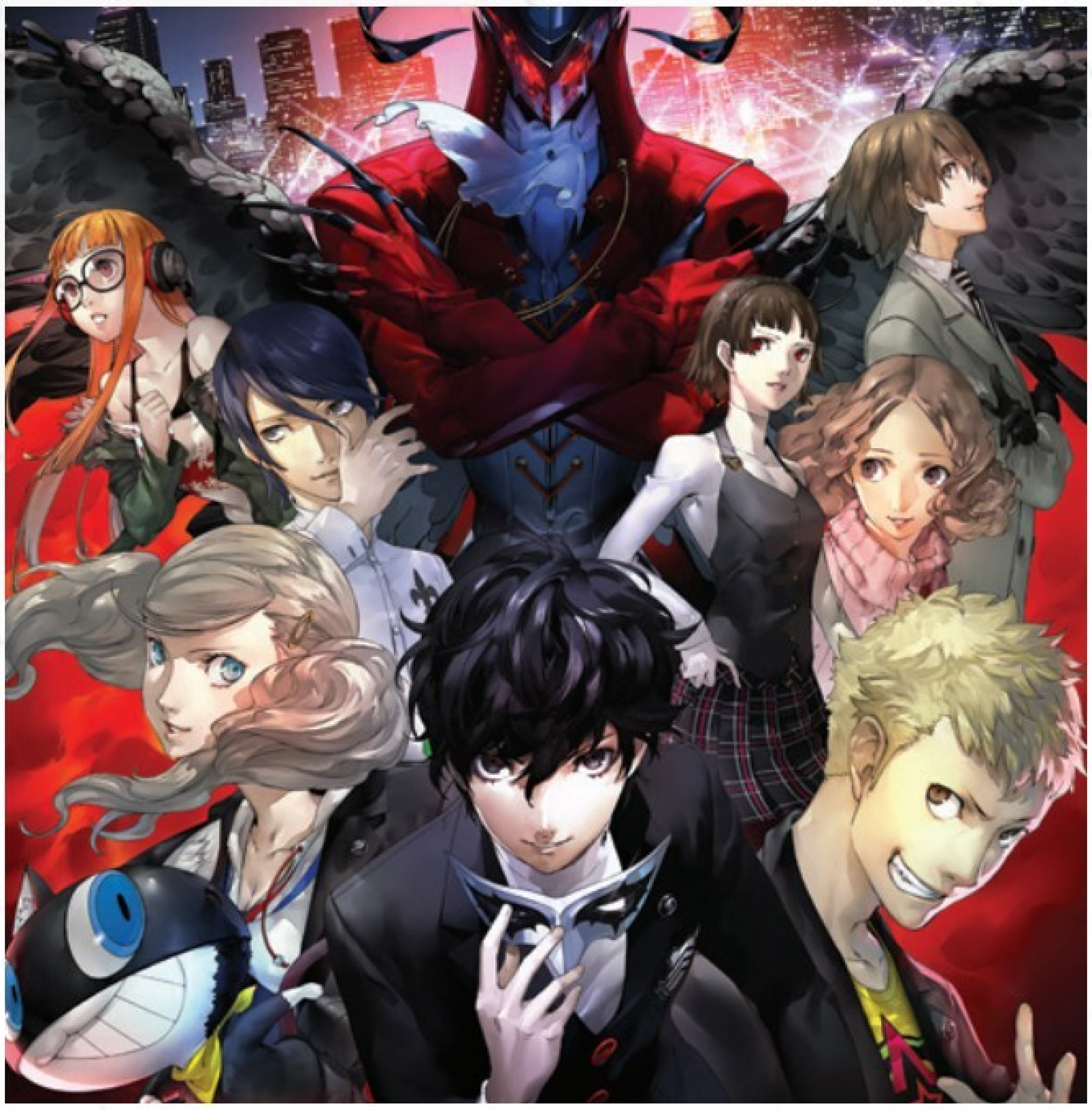
With esteemed adventure game developers Ron Gilbert and Gary Winnick at the helm, Thimbleweed Park was primed for success. This homage to the genre's golden age shines in its execution, as five bizarre, yet hilarious, characters attempt to solve clever puzzles and a mystery that feels straight out of Twin Peaks. Thimbleweed Park succeeds by poking fun at a beloved genre's tropes while embracing its best qualities.



Persona 5

April 4 | PS4 • PS3

High-school drama and traditional dungeon-delving collide in Atlus' RPG masterpiece. Persona 5 lets you study, hang out with friends, and save the world. Interesting scenes unfold as you develop bonds, intense turn-based combat tests your skills, and a Persona fusion system pays off with remarkable depth. Add in the fantastic soundtrack and striking visuals and you have an adventure you don't want to end, even after 100 hours.

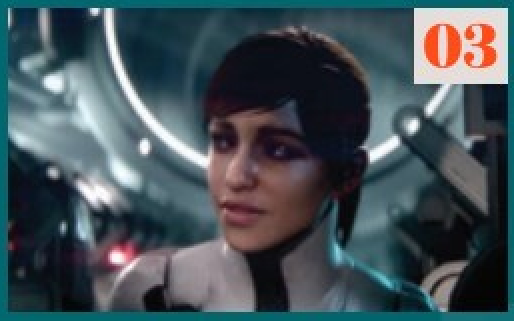


TOP 10 DISAPPOINTMENTS

01
CLASSIC
PREMIUM

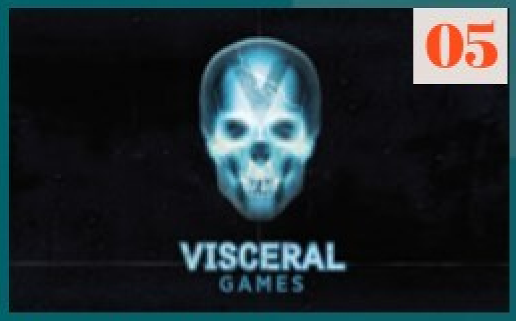
Predatory Microtransactions Cross The Line
Too many of our favorite titles came with an unwelcome dollop of predatory microtransactions, and the gameplay suffered because of it.

EA Embraces The Dark Side
From the balance-breaking microtransactions of Battlefront II to the Visceral Games debacle, EA's handling of the Star Wars license drew Jar Jar-levels of ire from fans this year.

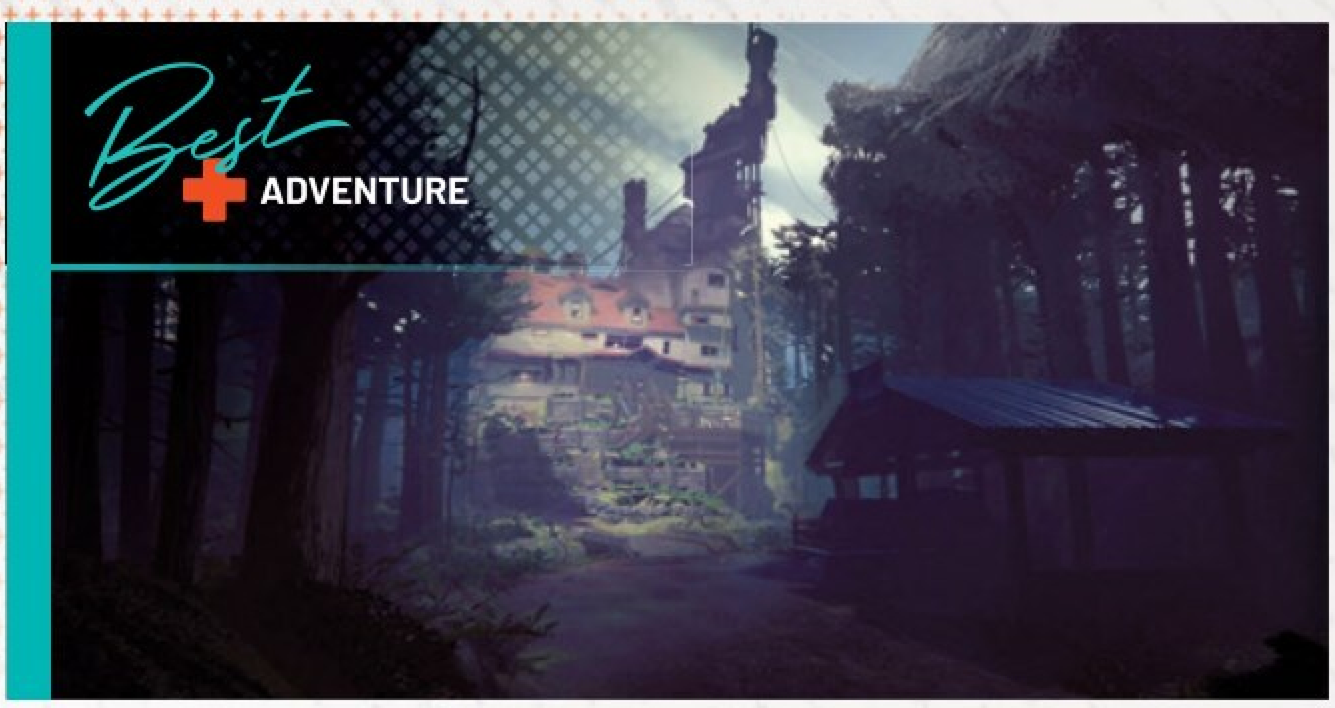


Mass Effect: Andromeda Goes Bust
A cast of forgettable characters, rote open-world activities, and more bugs than you could shake an omni-blade at sent BioWare's premier space opera RPG into cryo-sleep.

Microsoft's Flagging First-Party Support
Microsoft bought itself a few limited exclusives this year like Cuphead and PUBG, but its first-party offerings remained as sparse as ever. Forza can't keep the Xbox afloat by itself.



More Studio Closures
Another year, another long list of closures. We extend our best wishes to the fine folks at Runic Games, Visceral Games, Motiga, Gazillion Inc., and all the others who lost their jobs.



What Remains Of Edith Finch

April 25 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Developer Giant Sparrow puts an unforgettable twist on the familiar first-person narrative format with What Remains of Edith Finch. Relive the early deaths that plague the Finch family; whether you're transforming into a cat or taking a simple picture, the scenes are poignant and compelling. Despite the characters' inevitable dooms, each sequence has unique twists that keep the surprises coming until the end.

Little Nightmares

April 28 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

There's more than a passing resemblance between Tarsier Studios' atmospheric platformer and Playdead's pivotal game Limbo, but Little Nightmares manages to scratch out its own identity during its brief but effective runtime. Much of the game is left unexplained, which makes its grotesque sights even more chilling – including cannibalistic chefs and rooms filled with discarded shoes. It's a creepy way to spend an afternoon, and moments stick with you long after you've finished.

Prey

May 5 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Arkane's reimagining of Prey didn't light the same spark of critical acclaim as Dishonored, but it brings the same subtle cleverness and detailed world building. Exploring the largely abandoned crew quarters of the Talos-1 space station brings you face-to-face with one of the more interesting alien designs we've seen in recent sci-fi works, and the engaging neuromod upgrade system allows players to tailor the experience to their play styles.

06
Bethesda

Good Games Don't Sell Well
Gamers love to complain about the glut of microtransactions, but innovative single-player experiences like Prey, Dishonored, and Wolfenstein all got punished at the registers despite critical acclaim.

Dealing With Data
From juggling with hard drive space on our current-gen consoles to dancing around ISP data caps, our memory concerns in 2017 are a thing we'd like to forget.

Nintendo Still Doesn't Get The Net
Nintendo's newest console is a massive hit, but its online plans are still a mess. From the delayed network rollout to its convoluted voice chat solution, the Switch deserves better.

The Half-Life Dream Dies
Following Marc Laidlaw's departure last year, series co-writers Erik Wolpaw and Chet Faliszek both departed Valve for new ventures, leaving no one left to write a potential Half-Life sequel.

VR Still Lacks Marquee Titles
VR sales rolled right along in 2017, but the budding platform still lacks the big games it needs to be a hit. Aside from Resident Evil 7, most VR offerings still felt like tech demos.

Best
FIGHTING

Injustice 2

May 11 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Building on the solid foundation of NetherRealm's previous licensed fighter, Injustice 2 went above and beyond every other fighting game this year. Swapping large parts of the roster for new combatants offers lots of new tools for experimentation, and the fresh blood makes for some fun moments in the breezy single-player mode. The new loot and multiverse also gives those afraid of online competition a great way to learn new fighters at their own pace.

Path Of Exile: Fall Of Oriath

June 4 | Xbox One • PC

While Path of Exile receives frequent updates worthy of mention, this expansion more than doubled the size and scope of the core experience, giving players many more adventures to experience on the way to the content-rich replayable endgame. Whether you're looking for a rare item, rerolling stats, hunting down bosses in randomized maps, or trying to create the perfect mix of passive talents and active skills, Path of Exile provides a deep, rich dive into everything that makes the isometric hack-and-slash loot-hunting genre great.

Best
RACING

Dirt 4

June 6 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Codemasters runs multiple racing franchises, but Dirt is its best one. In fact, the latest entry is the best racing title this year. Dirt 4 includes an in-depth career mode – complete with upgradable staff and the constant need to repair and improve parts – to its already solid rally racing foundation. Furthermore, its rallycross and landrush disciplines, as well as the gymkhana-like compounds, add variety to make this game more than just an expansion to Dirt Rally.

Nex Machina

June 20 | PS4 • PC

Housemarque is known for being a master of the modern arcade experience, and its ode to the Robotron formula maintains that reputation. Across blazingly challenging stages of twin-stick shooting, players blast hordes of robotic foes on a march to save humanity. Depth appears over time as specifics like enemy placement and weapon variety take on increased significance. Multiple difficulties and steep point targets demand practice, precision, and patience in equal measures.

TOP 10 MOMENTS

Winner Winner Chicken Dinner ***(PUBG)***

Being the last one standing in PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds' brutal free-for-all is an incredible feeling and is easily the standout achievement in games this year for competitive players.

The Cannery ***(What Remains Of Edith Finch)***

The moving interactive short story collection about one unfortunate family reaches its zenith in a heartbreaking, brilliant story about the dangers of fantastical escape.

Getting The True Ending ***(Nier: Automata)***

Earning the final, true ending of Nier: Automata takes a lot of work but players are rewarded with an incredible sequence that presents a bold thematic take on sacrifice and love.

The New Donk City Festival ***(Super Mario Odyssey)***

Odyssey's joyful celebration of gaming's legendary icon is not only a fitting tribute but also a sensory delight, filled with retro sequences that pay tribute to the plumber's origins.

Burying The Hatchet ***(Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus)***

B.J. Blazkowicz's homecoming is a fantastic sequence, giving us insight into his upbringing and ending with a memorably bloody and tragic confrontation with a familiar face.

Final Fantasy XIV: Stormblood

June 20 | PS4 • PC

The subscription MMORPG space only has room for a few titans, and Square's massive take on its iconic franchise continues to stand out from the rest of the pack. Adding several new jobs, underwater zones to explore, and a slew of dungeons and raid experiences to dive into, Final Fantasy XIV provides another expansion packed with content for players to lose themselves in.

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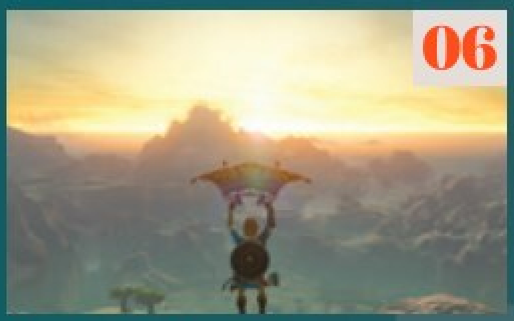
Splatoon 2

July 21 | Switch

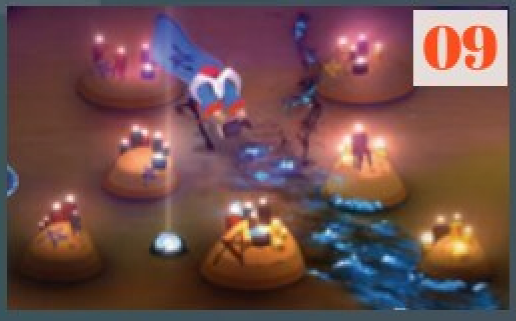
Many expected a port of the original Splatoon for Switch and were surprised to learn a full-on sequel would be available within the first few months of the new console's lifespan. The final product is a continuation of what made its predecessor so great alongside new modes, a new campaign, new weapons, and improvements to all facets of gameplay. Its online chat options are still absurd, but Splatoon 2 still stands out against its Switch shooter competition.



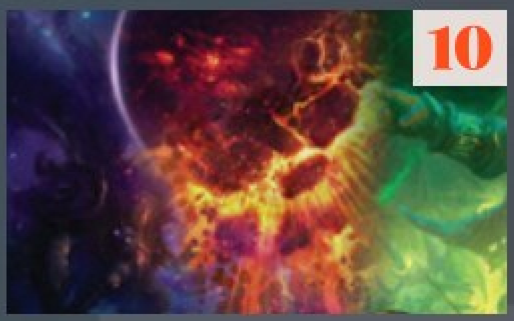
Leaving The Plateau *(The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild)*
Hyrule is teeming with secrets and memorable quests. Airsailing off the plateau at sunset into the great wide open is a great introduction to your journey.

A Parent's Love *(South Park: The Fractured But Whole)*
South Park has never shied away from dark humor, but a certain scene involving choosing between your parents disturbed some of our biggest fans in the office.

Landing The Final Blow *(Persona 5)*
Few things this year were as satisfying as taking down the big baddie at the end of the arduous, epic journey that is Persona 5 and seeing everyone's arcs come to moving conclusions.



The Liberation Rite *(Pyre)*
In Pyre, you're working together with your team to escape the Downside. However, letting some of your pals go means robbing your team of tactical strength. Can you make the hard choices?



Taking Down Sargeras *(World Of Warcraft)*
Sargeras has long cast a shadow over Warcraft, so watching this force fall was a satisfaction years in the making. His massive sword remains embedded in the world as a solemn reminder.

Fortnite

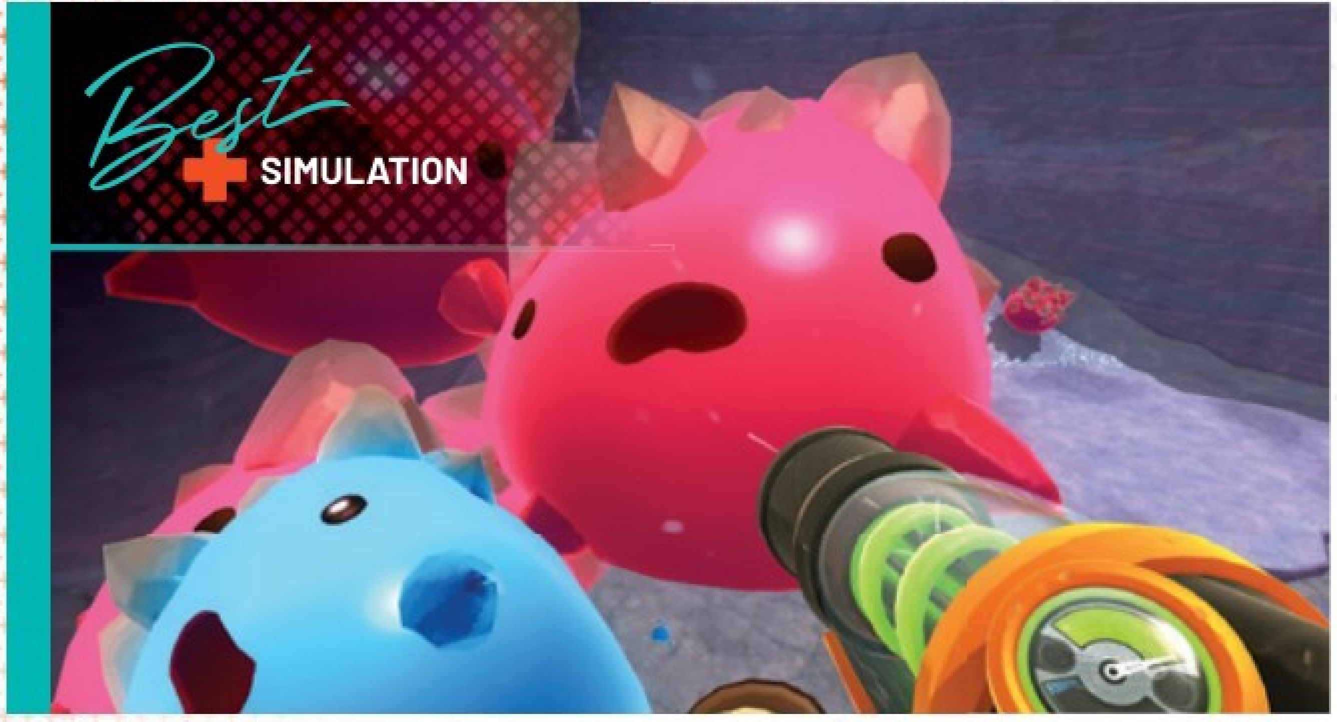
July 25 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Fortnite is a tale of two successes. It began as a fun cooperative survival game that pushed players to work together to build settlements and fend off zombie onslaughts. Months later, these players turned their weapons against each other in the wildly entertaining Fortnite Battle Royale, which eventually became a free standalone mode. Epic's continued support for both modes has been fantastic, giving players plenty of reasons to keep coming back for more.

Pyre

July 25 | PS4 • PC • Mac • Linux

Only Supergiant Games could recognize the potential of integrating classic arcade sports gameplay with a fantasy RPG. The wildly original universe of Pyre sees talking dogs, chivalric worms, and mobile trees fighting side-by-side to escape an exile into purgatory. Vibrant art, poignant writing, and stellar world building sit side-by-side with an original sport that is enticing all on its own. Somehow, the complicated mixture works like a charm.



Slime Rancher

August 1 | Xbox One • PC

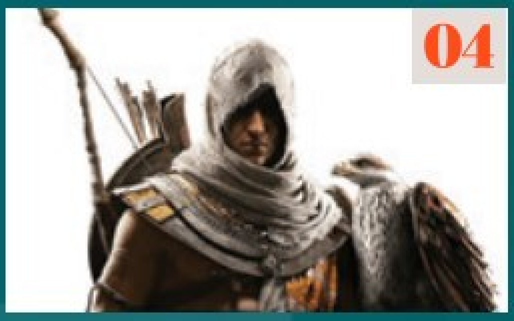
Slimes may look cute, but sometimes they explode, grow spikes, emanate radiation, or worse. This charming simulation from Monomi Park asks players to build different structures to accommodate their slimes' unique needs and diets, then venture into the wilderness to collect even more slimes. Equal parts exploration and optimization, Slime Rancher has a unique breed of easygoing depth that makes it simple to play and hard to put down.

TOP 10 CHARACTERS

Majima *(Yakuza 0)*
Majima has always been an intriguing and complicated showman. He's comedic, tragic, and effortlessly cool, but 0 is where he stands out as we discover what really made him into the "The Mad Dog of Shimano."

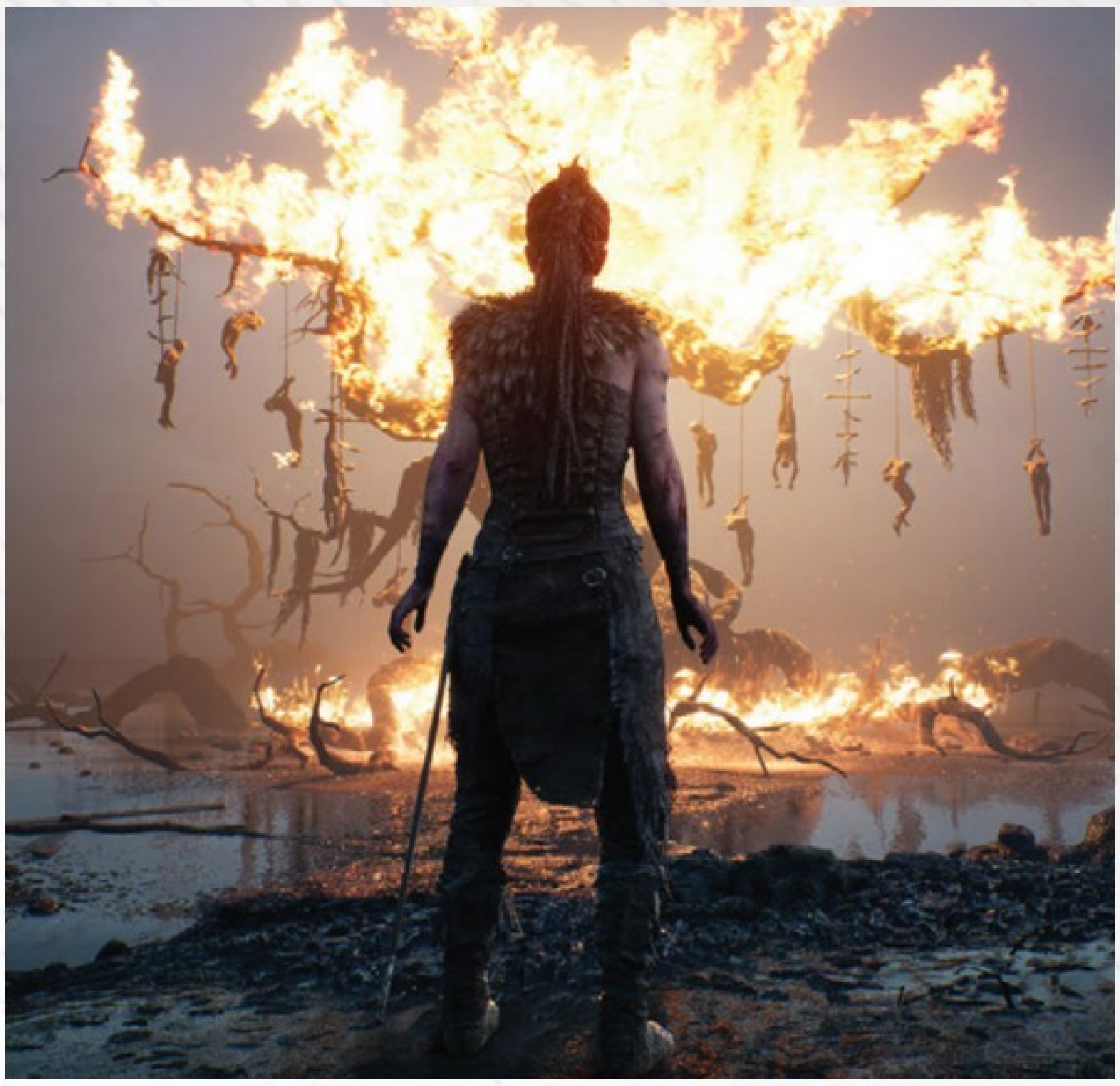
Mae *(Night In The Woods)*
What makes Mae so refreshing is she's just a 20-year-old trying to figure out her life. She's self-aware, hilarious, and a bit misguided. Watching her grow and gain strength to face her problems is heartening and inspiring.

Aloy *(Horizon Zero Dawn)*
Aloy burns with a curiosity to discover the world, even if that means battling giant robot dinosaurs for answers. She's resourceful and, at times, stubborn, but her best quality is she doesn't let her difficult past define her.



Bayek *(Assassin's Creed Origins)*
Bayek is the strongest Assassin since Ezio. The loving father gives his all on his quest for revenge and to protect others. He also has lighter moments that make him more than a guilt-ridden man.

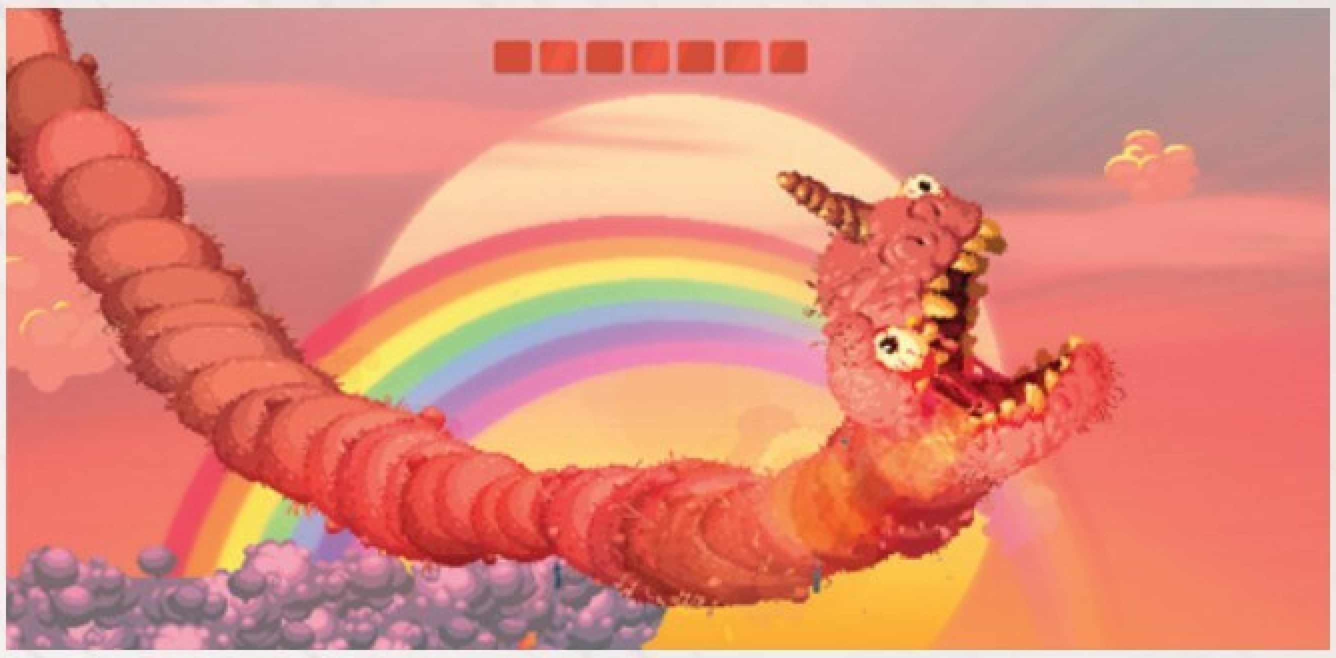
Frau Engel *(Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus)*
Stepping in as the main antagonist, Frau Engel upped her evil to shocking levels. You love to hate her as she gets under your skin, making every triumph against her satisfying.

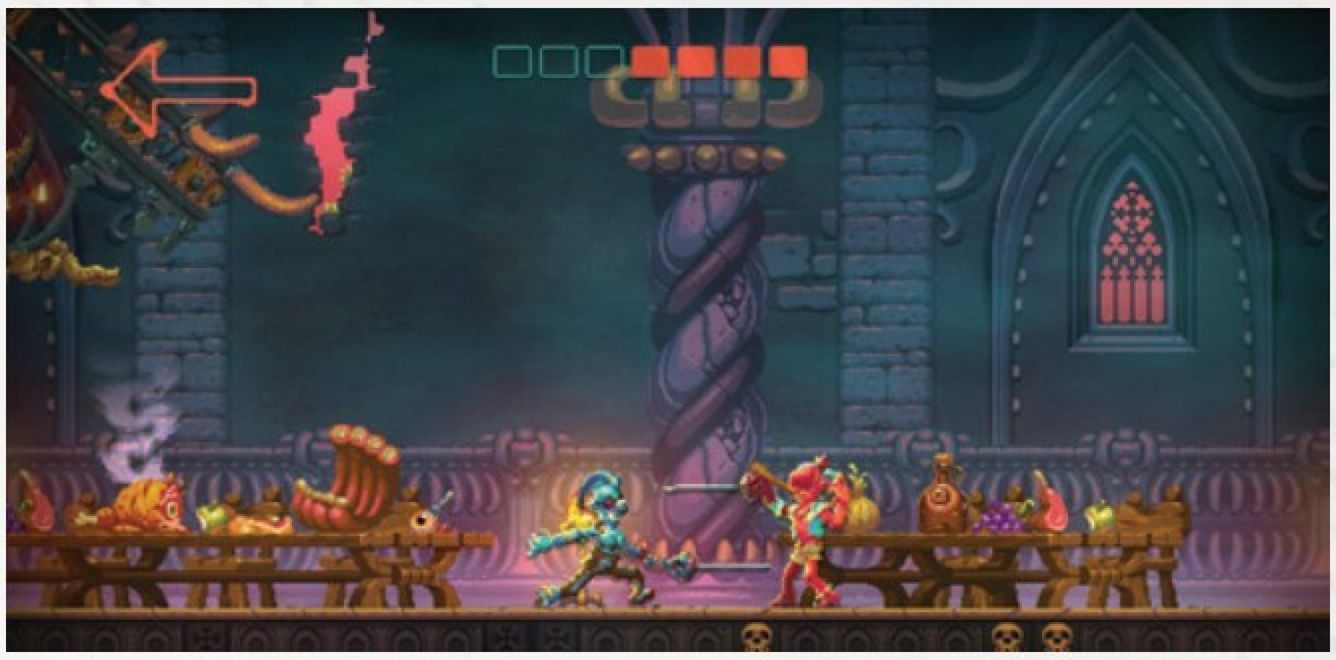


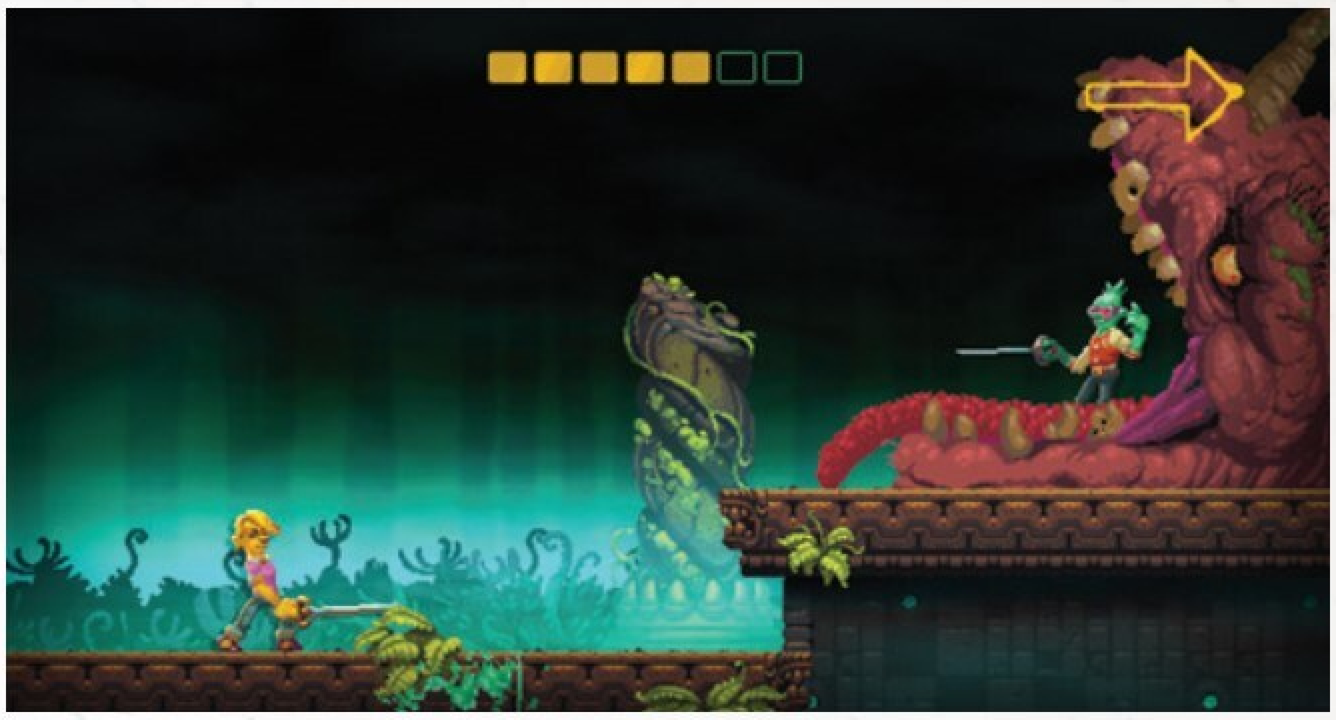
Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice

August 8 | PS4 • PC

Known for strong action titles like DmC and Heavenly Sword, Ninja Theory's Hellblade gambit paid off with strong reviews and sales. It's hard to deny how well-crafted this sensory experience is, inviting players to step inside one person's mind as she descends headlong into the jaws of hell for a loved one. The studio proved the transition to indie doesn't have to sacrifice triple-A looks.



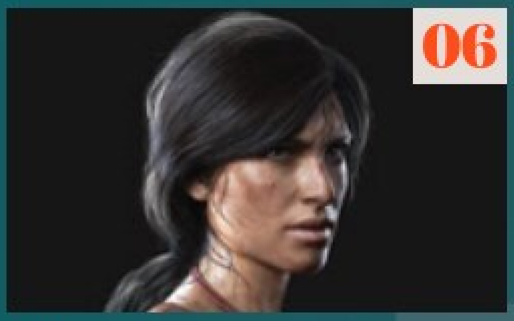




Nidhogg 2

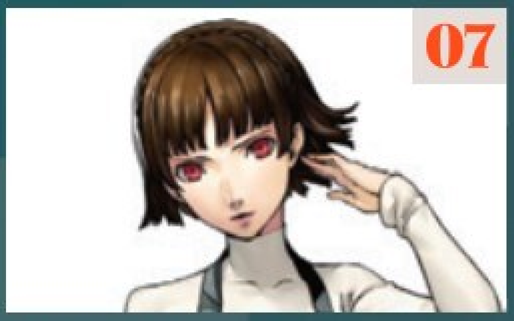
August 15 | PS4 • PC

A sequel to the 2014 multiplayer joust-a-thon, Nidhogg 2 brought more delights with bigger stages, a grotesque but compelling art style, and various weapons to mix things up. Match modifiers also allow for amusing moments, like boomerang weapons and "baby mode." While Nidhogg 2 might not have much in the way for those who like to game alone, it's both a fantastic party experience and an intense, albeit goofy, way to settle an argument.



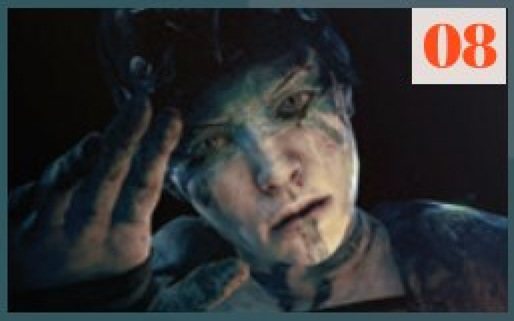
06

Chloe Frazer *(Uncharted: The Lost Legacy)*
Chloe proved herself worthy of her own game in The Lost Legacy. Seeing the headstrong and spontaneous thief explore her heritage in India and learn to trust another made her more intriguing.



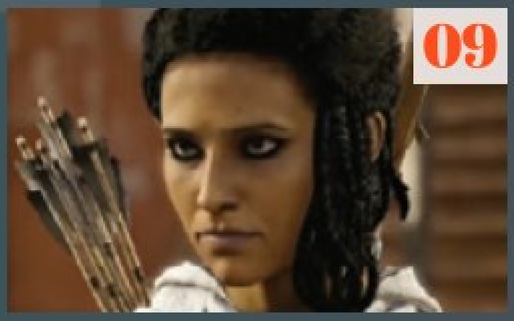
07

Makoto Niijima *(Persona 5)*
Makoto is never one to compromise her convictions and is always prioritizing the greater good. Watching her battle her inferiority complex and transform into a more confident and versatile person is a highlight of the game.



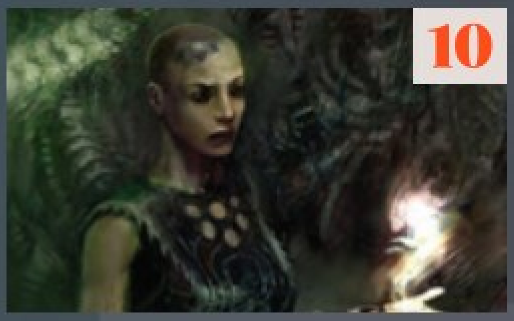
08

Senua *(Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice)*
Senua is not like most protagonists, as her psychosis is permeating. You connect by hearing the voices in her head and suffering in her tormented visions, surviving madness with her.



09

Aya *(Assassin's Creed Origins)*
As Bayek's wife who is also facing tragedy, Aya helps show the strength of their marriage. She's much more calculating than Bayek, helping Cleopatra rise in power and holding her own in battle.



10

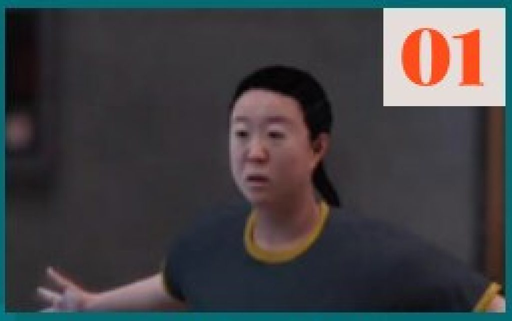
The Last Castoff *(Torment: Tides Of Numenera)*
You assume the discarded body of a powerful godlike being, making a blank slate to define who you are. The character represents the existential angst and struggle to establish an identity.

Uncharted: The Lost Legacy

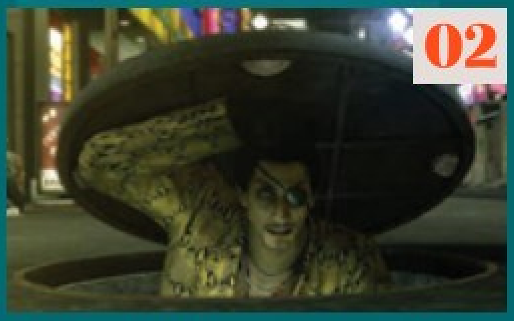
August 22 | PS4

Though Nathan Drake's story wrapped up in 2016, the Uncharted series is alive and well through the daring and heartfelt tale of Chloe and Nadine. Naughty Dog is renowned for its ability to craft believable characters in extraordinary circumstances, and The Lost Legacy is no exception. The high-octane climbing and shooting returns, but seeing how the ragtag duo coalesces to overcome the odds is the true reward.

TOP 10 DORKS



B-Fresh ***(NBA 2K18)***
This freeloader eats your food, invites losers to your house, and ruins your big breaks with bad ideas. If this is your best friend, you need to need to hang out with cooler people.

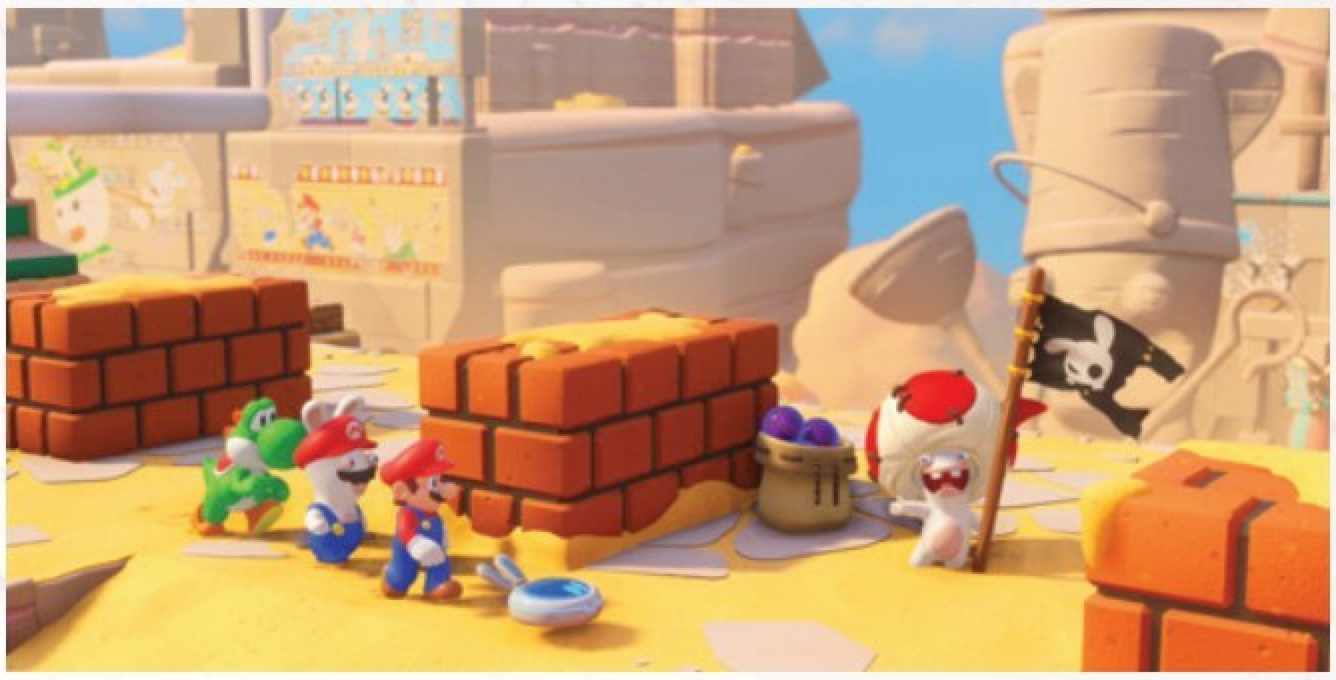


Majima ***(Yakuza Kiwami)***
How the mighty have fallen! In Yakuza Kiwami, the once-cool Majima is demoted to Comic Relief Trash Clown, jumping out from garbage bins and manholes to challenge Kiryu.

Tora ***(Xenoblade Chronicles 2)***
Imagine a character who talks exactly like the annoying house elf from Harry Potter. Now imagine that instead of being done after a movie or two, you have to spend 100 hours with him.

Rabbid Peach ***(Mario + Rabbids Kingdom Battle)***
Finally, a character that mixes the Rabbids' inherent dorkiness with the compulsion to constantly take selfies. The only way Rabbid Peach could be worse is if she were Rabbid Waluigi.

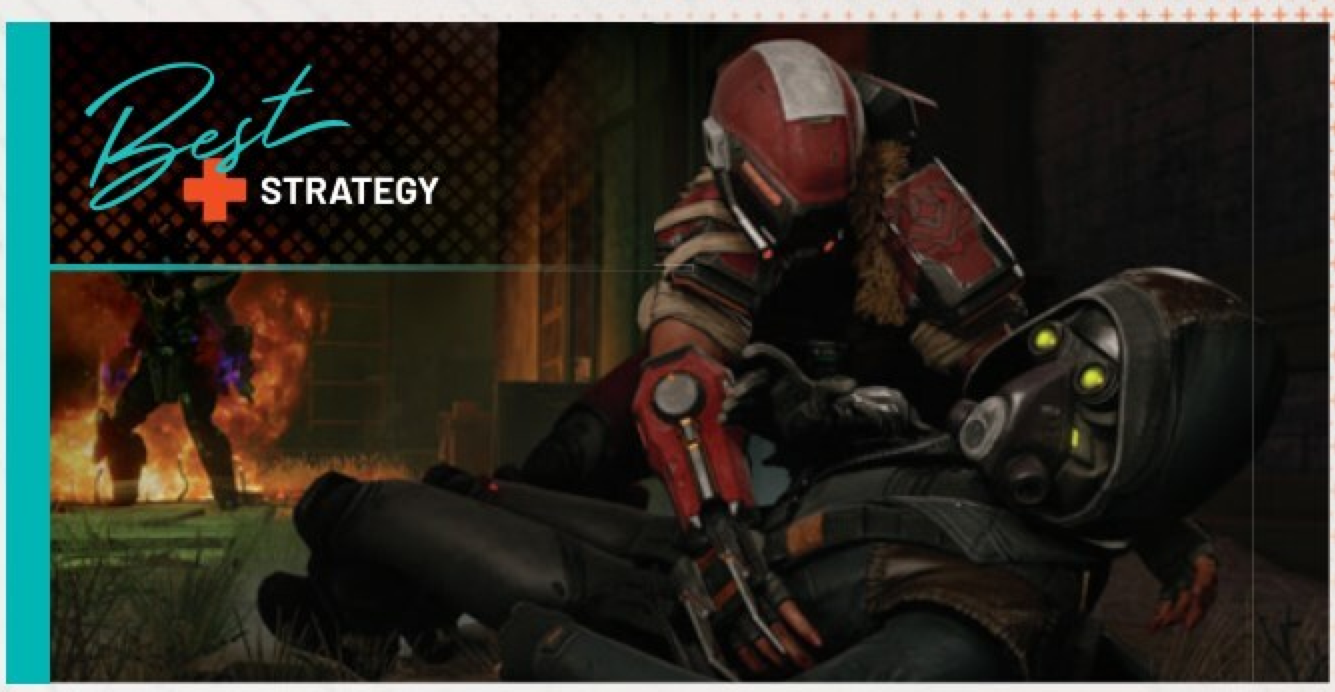
Your Avatar ***(Sonic Forces)***
Who thought Sonic's menagerie of friends needed to get dumber? After meticulously creating your ugly character, your reward is an entire game full of its grunts and stupefied silence.



Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle

August 29 | Switch

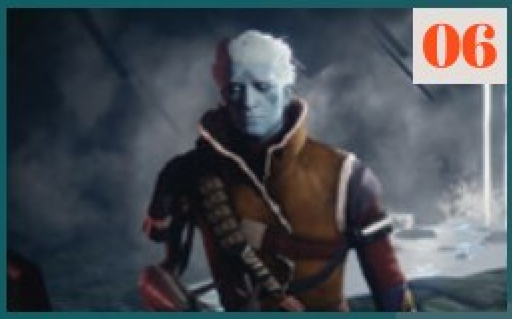
Mario is slowly working his way through every game genre, and he can finally scratch turn-based, XCOM-style strategy off that list. Mario and his crew battle their way through a distorted version of the Mushroom Kingdom before a giant reality vortex consumes the universe. A wild assortment of creative weapons and powers gives our favorite plumber plenty of ways to outflank his foes on the battlefield. Even the inclusion of Ubisoft's Rabbids couldn't ruin this good time.



XCOM 2: War Of The Chosen

August 29 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Continuing the long tradition of Firaxis' overstuffed expansion packs, War of the Chosen brings radical changes to XCOM 2, improving one of this generation's best strategy games. With three new deadly antagonists to fight as well as a host of new units, maps, and storyline improvements, War of the Chosen adds an entire game's worth of content and tweaks, making it worthwhile for both newcomers and returning players.

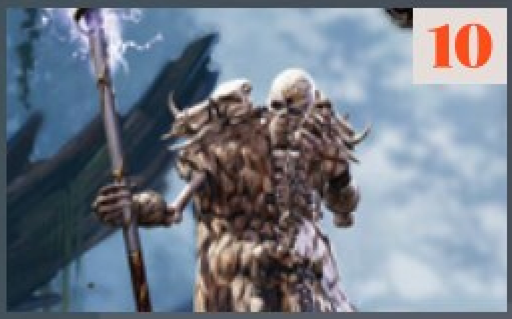


Asher Mir ***(Destiny 2)***
Indignant and high-strung from the start, this loony researcher can't decide what he likes better – spouting science gibberish that no one understands, or berating us for all the ways we don't live up to his standards.

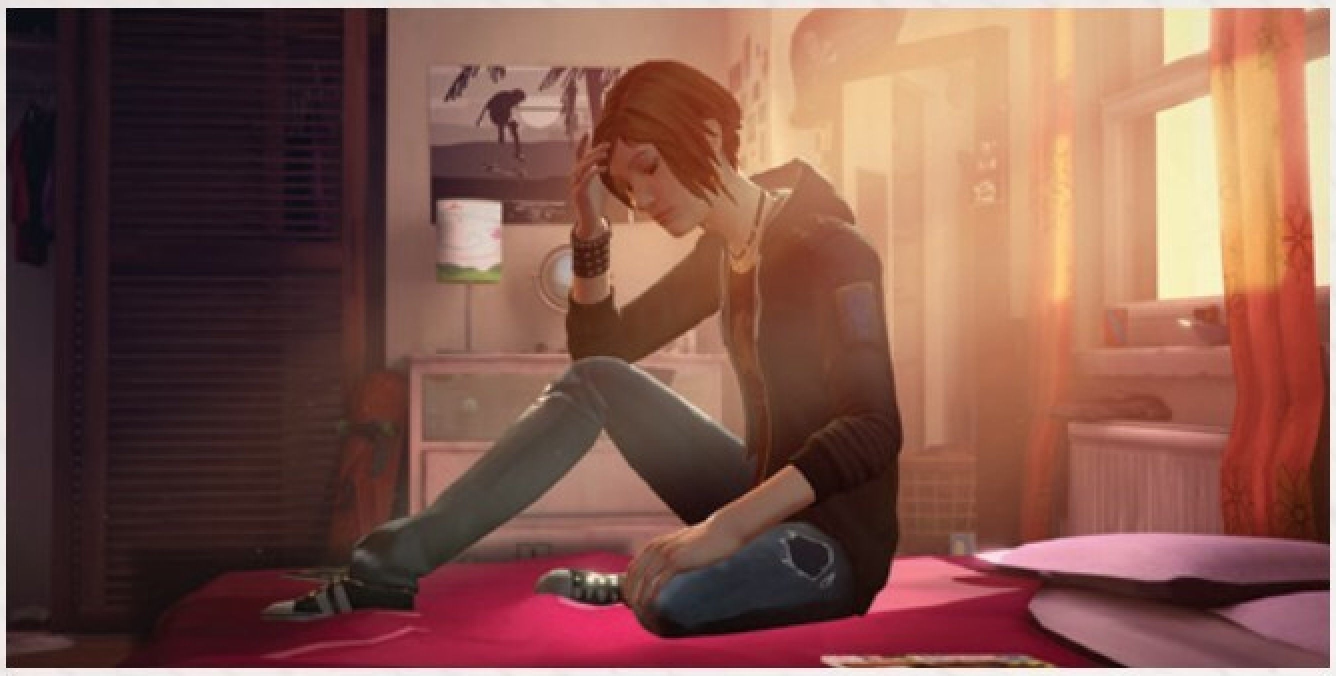
Super Spesh ***(Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus)***
Though his profanity-laced paranoia may be funny at first, Super Spesh quickly wears out his welcome. He's loud, annoying, and won't shut up about his lame conspiracy theories.

Master Kohga ***(The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild)***
If you were expecting a climactic encounter with the leader of the Yiga clan, think again. Master Kohga proves he's all bluster by practically defeating himself in your showdown.

Green Arrow ***(Injustice 2)***
Who wants to be Green Arrow when Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman are options? No one! Plus, his nauseating array of dad jokes constantly miss the mark.



Fane ***(Divinity: Original Sin II)***
Fane is an undead scholar who chronicles harrowing situations with clinical detachment. While often amusing, that's not a great quality in an ally who is supposed to keep you alive.



Life Is Strange: Before The Storm

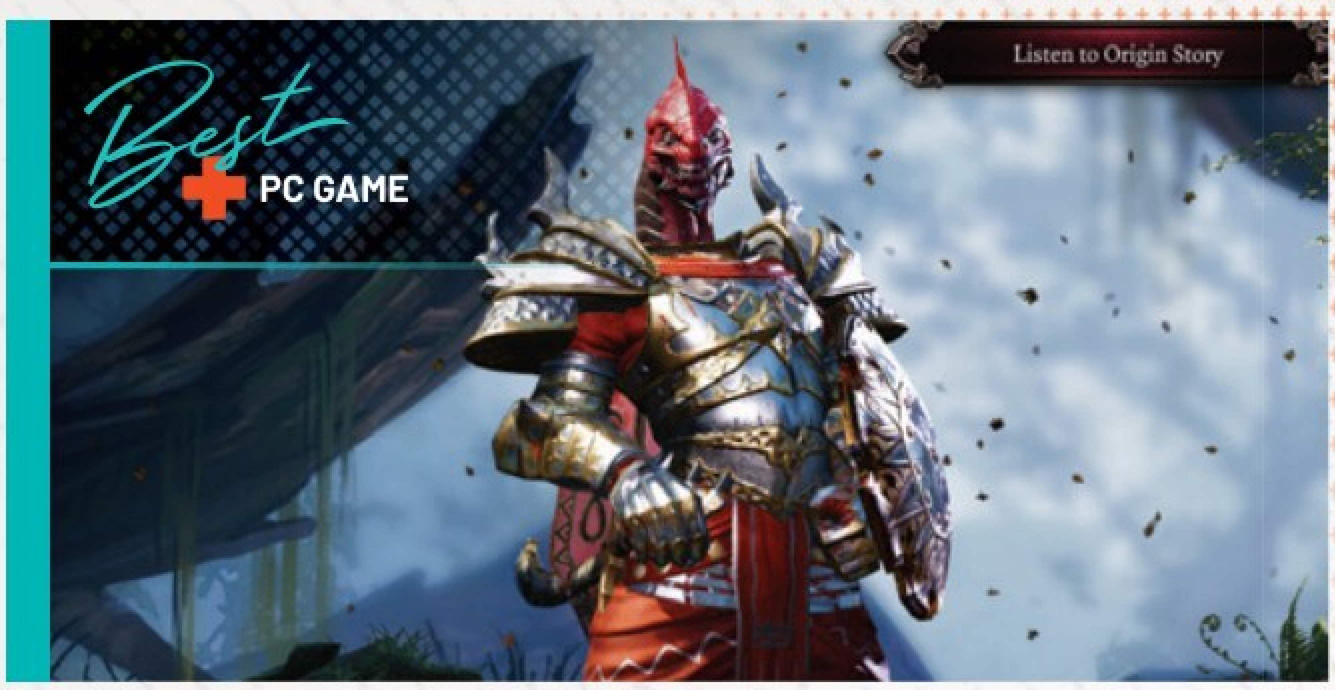
August 31 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

When this prequel was announced, it was easy to have reservations, as Life is Strange developer Dontnod was not involved. However, even as a rather unknown entity, Deck Nine rose to the challenge, creating an emotional tale centering on the relationship between two women: Chloe and Rachel. Watching their complicated friendship unfold let us see both characters in a new light. Before the Storm stayed true to the original, tackling life's hardships and reminding us once again how our loved ones and the choices we make define who we are.

Destiny 2

September 6 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Humanity's last city has fallen, its leaders are scattered, and only you stand between an alien tyrant and crushing defeat; sounds like another day in the life of a Guardian. Bungie took a big risk in resetting its futuristic shooter with an eye toward inviting new players into the fold. The gambit paid off, with lots of new Guardians joining the fray. Now, facing criticism of the endgame loop, Bungie tackles the tougher challenge of keeping players – both new and old – engaged for the long haul.



Divinity: Original Sin II

September 14 | PC

The second installment in Larian Studios' modern take on the classic PC RPG is full of choice, consequence, character, and unparalleled freedom. Play as classic fantasy archetypes or build your own zany crew, teleport through the world, become a telekinetic assassin, murder everyone you meet, or talk your way out of trouble. Much more than an homage to the genre, it sets a new high bar, with an amazing tactical combat system and more options than one player could ever hope to explore.

TOP 10 PUBLISHERS

01

Nintendo ***(Last Year: 9)***
With three games hitting above the 9.5 threshold, plus an amazing first-year lineup that helped make the Switch the hottest gadget of 2017, it's hard to imagine Nintendo having a better year than 2017.

02

Ubisoft ***(Last Year: 6)***
Ubi fended off a Vivendi takeover another year thanks to a stellar lineup that included Assassin's Creed Origins, Ghost Recon Wildlands, South Park, Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle, and For Honor.

03

Sony ***(Last Year: 8)***
Sony found a new flagship franchise with Guerrilla's Horizon Zero Dawn, and Naughty Dog delivered another strong game as well with Uncharted: The Lost Legacy.

04

Activision Blizzard ***(Last Year: 1)***
Call of Duty: WWII and Destiny 2 led the charge for Activision, but its biggest feat was the amazing support for Overwatch, Hearthstone, World of Warcraft, Diablo, and even StarCraft.

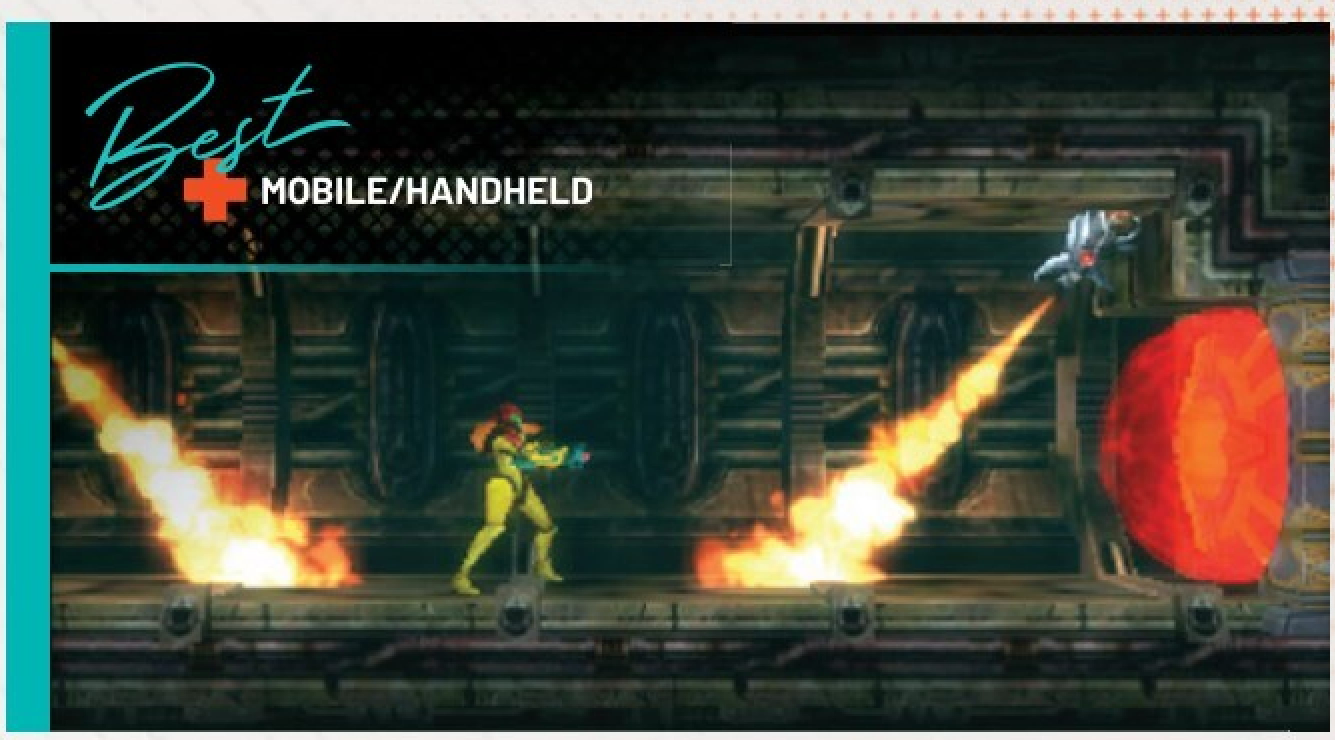
05

Bethesda ***(Last Year: 2)***
Bethesda's games may not have become blockbusters, but no one is questioning the quality or craftsmanship of Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus, Prey, or Dishonored: Death of the Outsider.

Dishonored: Death Of The Outsider

September 15 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Fans of the series might be disappointed that Death Of The Outsider could be the final installment. However, this standalone expansion starring fan favorites Billie Lurk and Daud offers not only more of the same play-it-your-way thrills but also ends things strongly. It does justice to Arkane's dark, fantastical world with a memorable final decision.



Metroid: Samus Returns

September 15 | 3DS

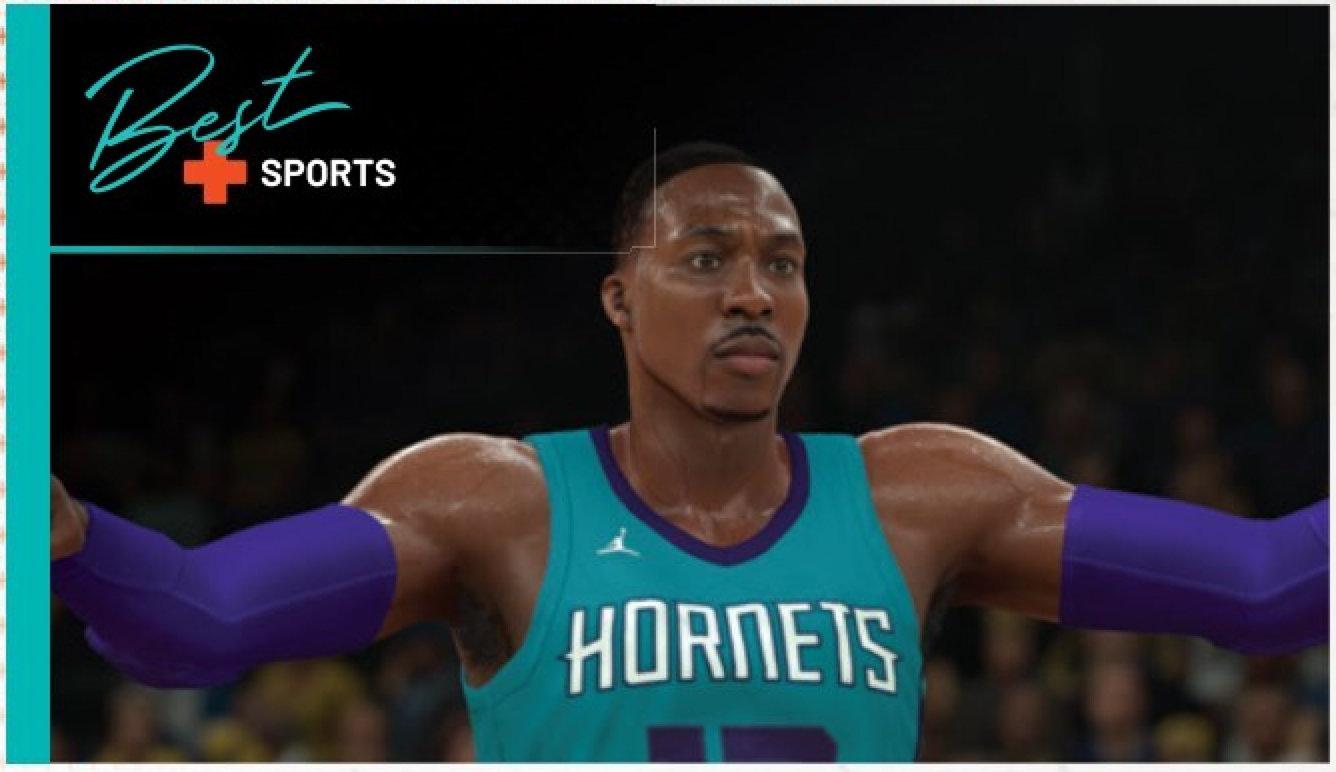
Samus' mission to eradicate the parasitic Metroid species on planet SR388 might technically be a remake of a 1991 Game Boy game, but it feels like a new adventure in almost every other way. Mercury Steam's new counter attack system and Aeion abilities revitalized Metroid's simple combat and spurred on our hunt to collect every upgrade in the labyrinthine caves of SR388. Even if you played the original Game Boy version, you need to play this modern classic.

SCORE 0
TIME 1'38"40
RINGS 30
×3

Sonic Mania

September 15 | PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC

After multiple attempts to capture the essence of Sonic the Hedgehog's glory years, Sega sanctioned a group of independent developers to deliver a worthy successor to the Genesis classics. Sonic Mania pays loving homage to the Blue Blur's origin at every turn, but also showcases all-new moments that remind us why those early games are still highly regarded. Sonic Mania not only stands out as a terrific throwback, but also as the best Sonic game in years.



NBA 2K18

September 19 | PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC

Overzealous microtransactions and poor server performance spoiled NBA 2K18's coming out party, but these misses don't eclipse the high shooting percentage Visual Concepts has for making compelling modes. The MyGM, MyCareer, and MyTeam options offer hundreds of hours of compelling play, and the on-court action is once again stellar, making this our slam dunk choice for sports game of the year.

06

Square Enix *(Last Year: 7)*
A year after getting Final Fantasy back on track in 2016, Square found success in 2017 with offbeat titles like Nier: Automata and Life is Strange: Before the Storm.

07

Sega *(Last Year: N/A)*
Sega's bet on acquiring Atlus paid off. The dynamic duo landed four games on our Top 50 list – Yakuza 0, Persona 5, Total War: Warhammer II, and Sonic Mania. Not bad for a budding relationship.

08

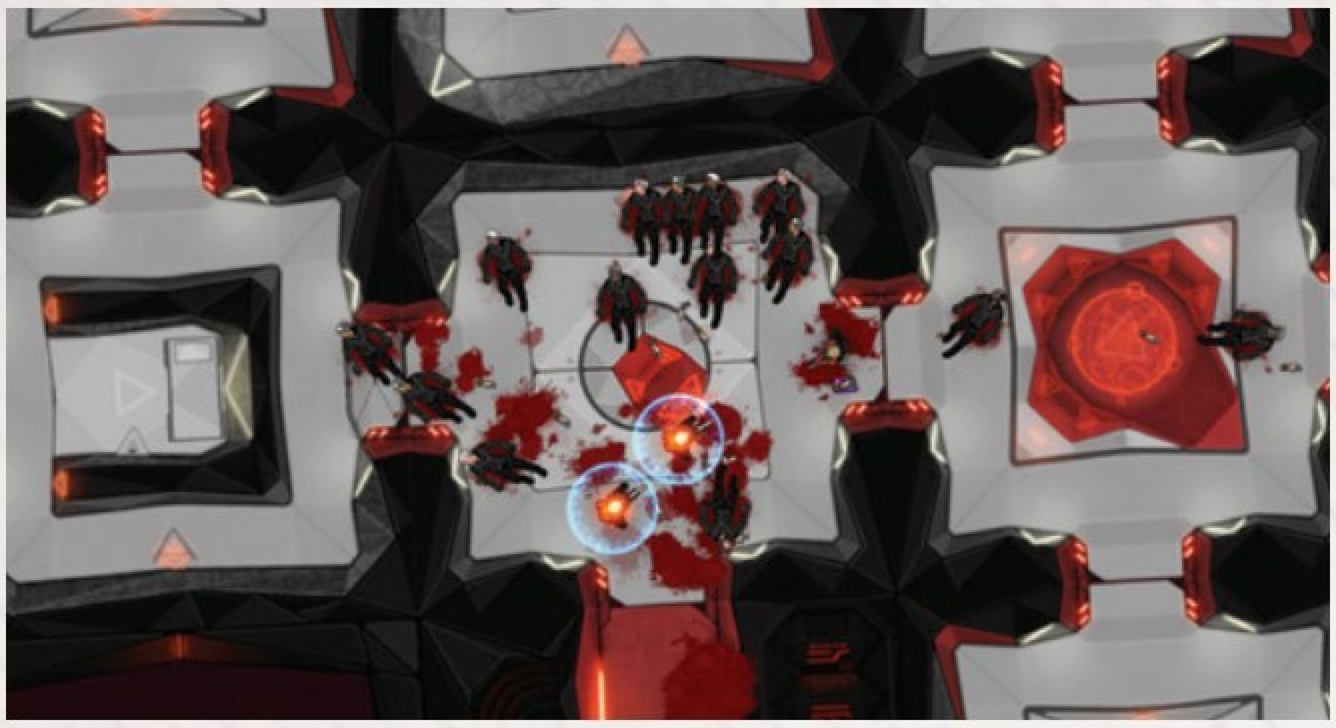
Warner Bros. *(Last Year: N/A)*
Warner's decision to acquire Nether-Realm continues to pay off. Injustice 2 won our fighting game of the year award, and Monolith's Middle-earth: Shadow of War won over action fans as well.

09

Take Two *(Last Year: 3)*
A relatively quiet year with just NBA 2K18 and XCOM 2: The War of the Chosen cracking our list, you also can't overlook the continued success of Grand Theft Auto Online.

10

Capcom *(Last Year: 10)*
The beloved Japanese publisher didn't release a ton of games in 2017, but the first game it launched, Resident Evil 7, was a critical recalibration for the series.



Heat Signature

September 21 | PC

Heat Signature comes from the mind of Tom Francis, best known for his 2013 stealth-puzzle-platformer, Gunpoint. The game finds an engaging middle-ground between strategy and action by letting players explore a large galaxy and sneak aboard ships to perform infiltration, assassination, or robbery. You can pause the action at any time to arrange your plan of quiet attack, or go in guns blazing. Different approaches are available for every mission, leading to an innovative and fun time.

EL MACHINO
CUSTOMS
HOT

SteamWorld Dig 2

September 21 | PS4 • Switch • Vita • PC

SteamWorld Dig 2 is all about digging through the dirt so you can buy stuff that makes you better at digging through dirt. However, developer Image & Form turns that simple concept into an engaging, Metroid-inspired journey thanks to an array of clever upgrades. You expand your repertoire and open up new sections of the world as part of a loop that constantly has you itching to take "just one more trip" down into the mines.

Golf Story

September 28 | Switch

Golf Story is as charming as it is challenging; deftly blending a mean game of retro golf with a nicely penned story. Backed by an eccentric cast of characters and a wealth of variety in the worlds and missions, this RPG continually delivers the unexpected. One second you may find your golf game improving thanks to turtles that can increase the range of your drives. The next second you may be watching a rap battle unfold between millennials and senior citizens.

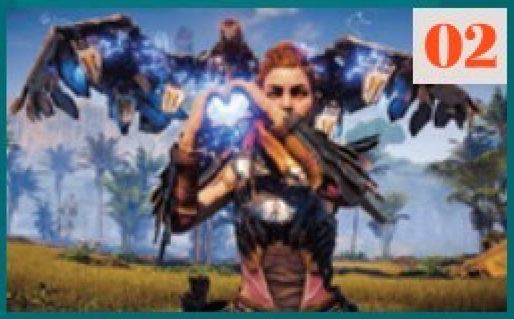
Total War: Warhammer II

September 28 | PC

Total War's signature blend of turn-based strategy and on-the-field real time battles continues to benefit from the fantasy fusion with Warhammer. Featuring a fleshed out campaign and inspired takes on classic and bizarre races like the squabbling ratlike Skaven and out-of-control Lizardmen, there's more to manage and love than ever. Going back to historically accurate soldiers with axes and swords is going to be harder than ever after watching a rampaging dinosaur tear through your enemies.

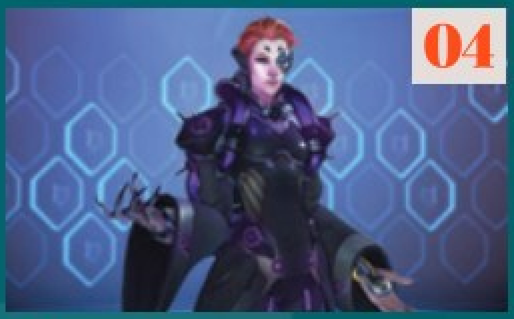
TOP 10 DEVELOPERS

Nintendo
Nintendo would be in this spot if it just made The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild. But its internal studios also gave us the gorgeous Super Mario Odyssey.

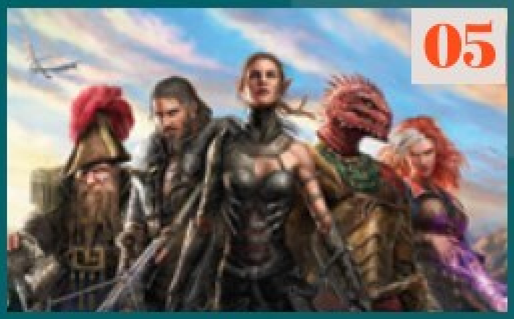


Guerrilla Games
After a decade of making Killzone games, Guerrilla's pent up creativity burst to form Horizon, one of the best open-world games of the year.

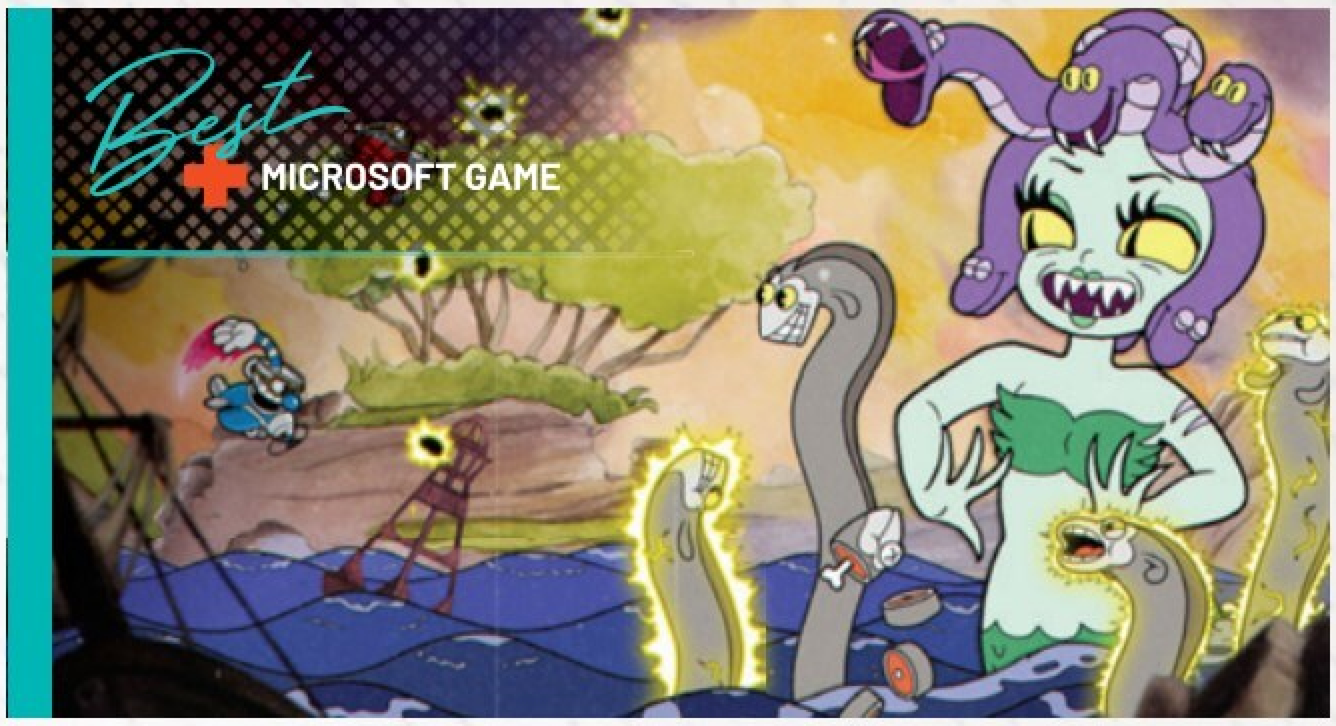
Bluehole
Teaming up with PlayerUnknown, this Korean studio came out of nowhere to make PUBG, the game that dominated Steam and Twitch all year.



Blizzard
Blizzard didn't technically release a new game in 2017, but the developer still sets the benchmark of how to successfully support a franchise after launch.



Larian Studios
The Belgian developer broadened its successful concept from Divinity: Original Sin to deliver a sequel many consider to be the best CPRG in years.



Cuphead

September 29 | Xbox One • PC

Studio MDHR's ode to classic cartoons and old-school arcade games was one of 2017's most visually striking – and difficult – releases. Cuphead and his pal Mugman battled a bizarre gauntlet of bosses, each one trickier than the last. Fortunately, its responsive controls make for a game that plays as well as it looks. Those who stick with it and hone their skills are rewarded with the catharsis that can only come from kicking a mentalist carrot back into the dirt.

FIFA 18

September 29 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

FIFA 18 keeps players engaged with Alex Hunter's story mode thanks to some welcome plot turns, the performances of its actors, and a better mix of cutscenes and on-the-field action. Elsewhere, the game livens up the grind of its Ultimate Team mode with single-player Squad Battles, and career mode gets minor tweaks to its transfer system. The latter mode needs to take a step forward and the gameplay is showing its age, but for now Alex Hunter is this side's big star.

Middle-earth: Shadow Of War

October 10 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Monolith returns to the Lord of the Rings setting with this freestyle adventure of conquest and exploration. Talion's tragic journey comes full circle in the over-the-top fantasy tale, but it's the emergent moments of the innovative Nemesis system that help the game shine. Whether dominating orcs in the depths of a spider-infested cavern, or leading the charge into a fiercely defended fortress, Shadow of War is a potent power fantasy that offers its own dark spin on Tolkien's world.

Atlus

Persona finally came to current-gen consoles. Thanks to its interesting cast and fantastic art direction, it was more than worth the wait.

Arkane Studios

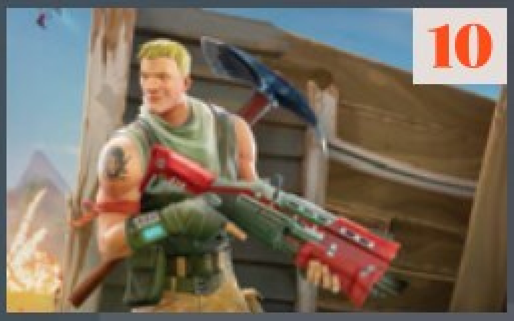
The kings of immersive sims delivered two great experiences in one year with Prey and Dishonored: Death of the Outsider.

Ninja Theory

With Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice, Ninja Theory proved you don't need to sacrifice high production values when going indie anymore.

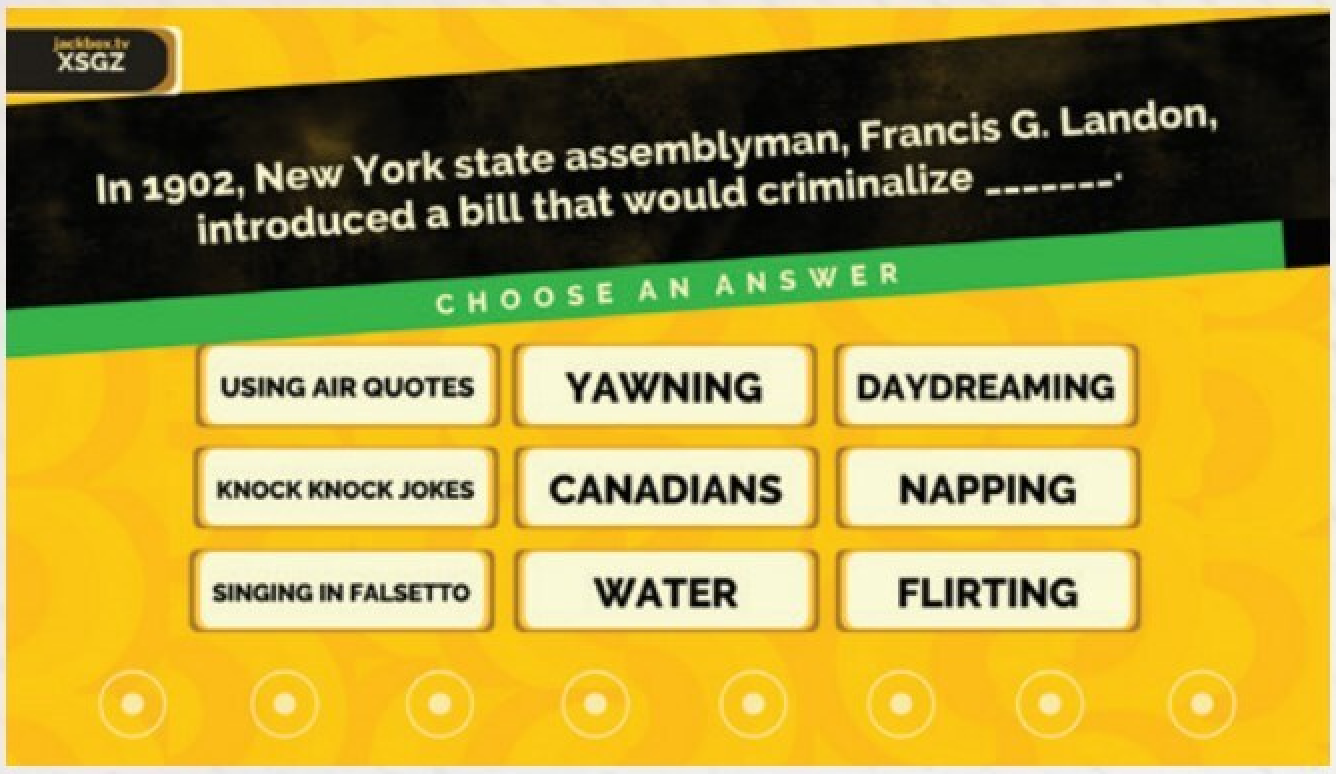
Studio MDHR

After several delays, Cuphead finally saw the light of day. Its tough-as-nails gameplay and gorgeous aesthetic made it an instant indie darling.



Epic Games

Fortnite launched as a decent cooperative PvE game, but became one of the year's biggest hits after Epic jumped on the battle royale bandwagon.


jackbox.tv
XSGZ

In 1902, New York state assemblyman, Francis G. Landon, introduced a bill that would criminalize _______.

CHOOSE AN ANSWER

USING AIR QUOTES	YAWNING	DAYDREAMING
KNOCK KNOCK JOKES	CANADIANS	NAPPING
SINGING IN FALSETTO	WATER	FLIRTING

Jackbox Party Pack 4

October 20 | PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC

As fans know, livening up a dull party is as easy as firing up one of Jackbox Games' compilations. The fourth collection features five new games, which let players bluff, joke, and strategize their way to victory. While each individual game is vastly different (including riffs on dating websites, online drama, and doodling), they have one thing in common: They'll make you laugh, even if you're losing.

South Park: The Fractured But Whole

October 22 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

You'd be hard-pressed to find a licensed game that better captures the spirit of the source material than Ubisoft's South Park titles. Moving from the fantasy genre of The Stick of Truth, The Fractured But Whole places the current phenomenon of superhero movie franchises in its crosshairs. The follow-up adds more than just new schticks, it also revamps its combat system, adds new collectibles, and gives you satisfying character customization.

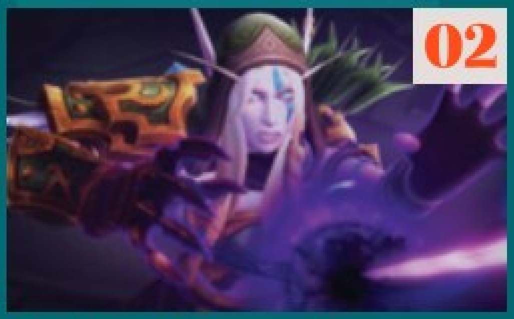
Assassin's Creed Origins

October 27 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Assassin's Creed returns triumphantly after a one-year hiatus. Origins changes up a number of core features of the series, such as combat and mission design, and mostly comes out on top. Open-ended missions that let you chart your own path to murder replace more linear objectives, and Egypt is one of the series' best locales yet, offering an enormous land full of secrets and sidequests. Throw in Bayek, the strongest lead since Ezio, and you have a stellar entry.

TOP 10 GAMES AS SERVICE

Path Of Exile
Multiple large content updates hit Path of Exile every year, with a commendable monetization system that stands out as an excellent example of doing it right.



World Of Warcraft
Twelve long years of the breakout MMORPG haven't dulled its presence. In the wake of Legion, Blizzard's gave players a substantial amount of new dungeons, raids, and major epic encounters.

League Of Legends
League gets new characters, items, and seasonal fare regularly, but an overhaul to the rune system this year changed everything, keeping it at the top of the team-based MOBA genre.

Dota 2
More characters, content, and a new Turbo mode are par for the course here, but the most striking factor remains the same – you can play with all of its characters for free, without any unlocking or grinding.

Grand Theft Auto Online
The gunrunning Doomsday heist and Smuggler's Run expansions alongside a stream of new vehicles and weapons helped GTA Online's engagement levels reach an all-time high in 2017.

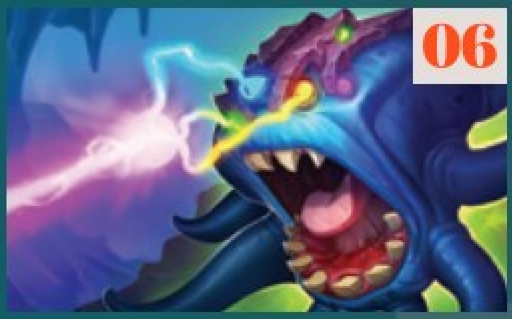
Best PLATFORMING

Super Mario Odyssey

October 27 | Switch

Super Mario Odyssey is the happiest game of 2017. Even the most curmudgeonly of gamers couldn't escape Mario's latest without a smile. Looking toward the Super Mario 64 school of 3D Mario games (as opposed to the Galaxy or 3D World schools) Odyssey delivers an experience that is both nostalgic and incredibly fresh. Impeccable level design keeps the brisk pace moving all the way to the game's credits (and beyond), and the capture mechanic means there are always new, surprising ways to experience the world around every turn.

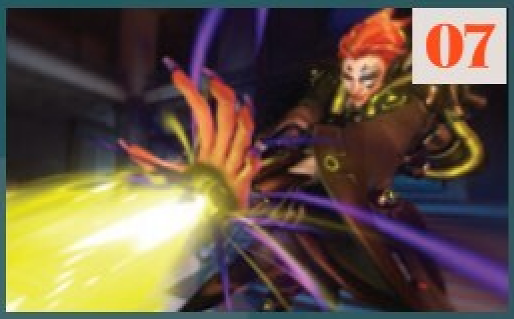
* These games stand out long after their initial release, receiving outstanding updates and continual support.



06

Hearthstone

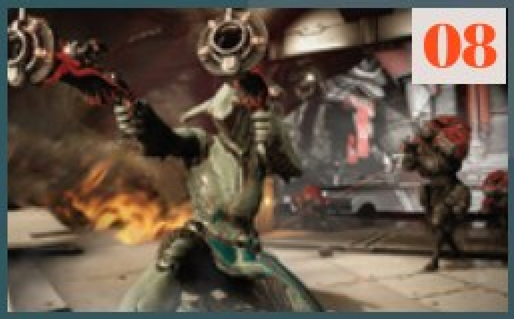
After several expansions and an amazing single-player dungeon crawling experience, Hearthstone shows the immense depth of digital trading card games.



07

Overwatch

Players have come to expect new characters and new maps along with special seasonal events, arcade modes, and more. It's a lot to love each and every year.



08

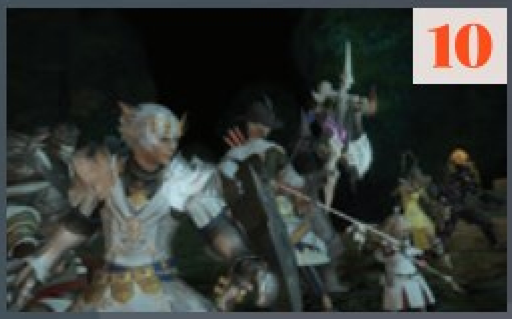
Warframe

Warframe gets awesome new things every year, but adding a fantastic open-world experience to the game was more ambitious and game-changing than anything it has done before.

09

Rainbow Six Siege

Ubisoft's thrilling competitive shooter continues to evolve with the introduction of game-changing operators, new maps, and quality-of-life updates.



10

Final Fantasy XIV

Stormblood provides many additions to the MMORPG, but Square's consistent support for every aspect, from Golden Saucer gambling to card-slinging Triple Triad, is impressive.

Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus

October 27 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Wolfenstein II followed up its predecessor with a war cry, telling the tale of B.J. Blazkowicz and a rag-tag gang of rebels as they confront a Nazi-occupied America. This first-person shooter takes many risks with its subject matter, offering a heartfelt and somber look at people trying to survive an oppressive regime. This combination of narrative ambitions and frenzied gunplay amounts to one of the best first-person shooters in years.

Call Of Duty: WWII

November 3 | PS4 • Xbox One • PC

Every year expectations are high for the triple threat of campaign, multiplayer, and zombies in Activision's premier shooter. A return to classic weaponry and boots-on-the-ground combat gives the series a much-needed snapback to its compelling origins. Although a by-the-numbers campaign leaves much to be desired, a challenging zombie mode and division-based multiplayer experiences make Call of Duty stand out yet again this year.

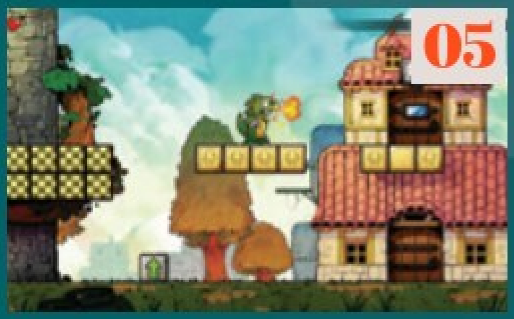
TOP 10 REMASTERS

Final Fantasy XII: The Zodiac Age
A highly desired remaster brought one of the more idiosyncratic Final Fantasy games to its full potential (and a wider audience) with visual upgrades and needed system overhauls.

Crash Bandicoot N. Sane Trilogy
The N. Sane Trilogy retains the quirks and difficulty of the original three Bandicoot games but seriously upgrades the visuals and packages them all together in a fun collection.

Yakuza Kiwami
Yakuza 0 stole both series newcomers and fans' hearts. Kiwami gave those same players a chance to play through a remade-from-the-ground-up version of the first game.

StarCraft: Remastered
Blizzard released its revolutionary RTS with a bevy of much-appreciated visual and audio enhancements that guarantee people will still be playing this classic 20 years after launch.



Wonder Boy: The Dragon's Trap
A surprise remaster that seemingly emerged out of nowhere, The Dragon Trap's beautiful hand-drawn aesthetic and other arrangements gave a cult classic a second life.

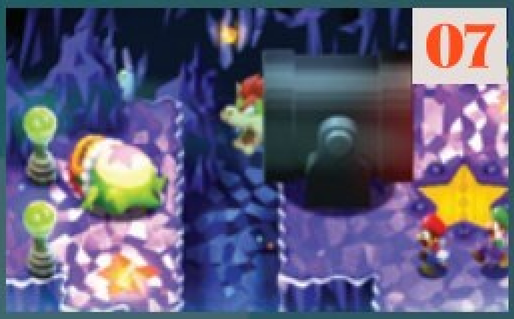
Best COMPETITIVE MULTIPLAYER SHOOTER

PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds

December 20 | Xbox One • PC

Behind every door, inside every looming window, and nestled in every racing vehicle careening down the hillside lies danger with a gun. That tension builds and builds to intense breaking points other games can't compete with. Whether you take on 99 other players by your lonesome or team up in duos or squads for tactical group play, there's nothing like the adrenaline rush of accidentally stumbling upon unsuspecting players with a shotgun at the ready or driving headlong into a fortified position guns blazing.

L.A. Noire
L.A. Noire never got its due. With a great remaster filled with performance upgrades for modern consoles, as well as all the DLC, maybe that will change.



Mario & Luigi Super Star Saga + Browser's Minions
A remake of the sturdy GBA game, this remaster doesn't alter too much visually but adds several hours of fun content.

Mario Kart 8 Deluxe
Nintendo could have easily settled for portability but adding racers, battle mode, and courses makes the Switch version a fantastic remaster, improving upon a modern classic.

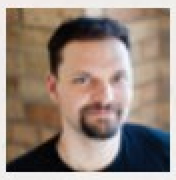
Kingdom Hearts HD 2.8 Final Chapter Prologue
The name is ridiculous but 2.8 packs a load of content to help tide fans over until III arrives, with both a port of Dream Drop Distance as well as a whole new episode and mini movie.

Full Throttle Remastered
Double Fine did a bang-up job touching up one of the best adventure games of the '90s with a cartoonish aesthetic as well as a helpful hint system.

Editor TOP 10 Picks

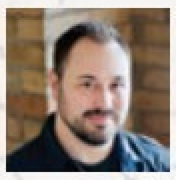
Andy McNamara

01 World of Warcraft: Legion
02 Super Mario Odyssey
03 Destiny 2
04 Uncharted: The Lost Legacy
05 Horizon Zero Dawn
06 SteamWorld Dig 2
07 Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus
08 Clash Royale
09 Prey
10 What Remains of Edith Finch



Andrew Reiner

01 The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild
02 Super Mario Odyssey
03 Horizon Zero Dawn
04 Assassin's Creed Origins
05 Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus
06 Metroid: Samus Returns
07 Golf Story
08 Resident Evil 7: Biohazard
09 What Remains of Edith Finch
10 Overwatch



Matt Bertz

01 Horizon Zero Dawn
02 Assassin's Creed Origins
03 PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds
04 Ghost Recon Wildlands
05 Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus
06 What Remains of Edith Finch
07 NBA 2K18
08 Dishonored: Death of the Outsider
09 Prey
10 Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice

Joe Juba

01 Persona 5
02 Horizon Zero Dawn
03 What Remains of Edith Finch
04 Night in the Woods
05 Uncharted: The Lost Legacy
06 Life is Strange: Before the Storm
07 Final Fantasy XII: The Zodiac Age
08 Nier: Automata
09 Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice
10 Mass Effect: Andromeda

Matt Miller

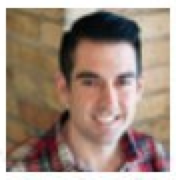
01 Horizon Zero Dawn
02 Super Mario Odyssey
03 Destiny 2
04 Nex Machina
05 Middle-earth: Shadow of War
06 Pyre
07 Torment: Tides of Numenera
08 Assassin's Creed Origins
09 The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild
10 For Honor

Kimberley Wallace

01 Horizon Zero Dawn
02 Persona 5
03 Super Mario Odyssey
04 Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus
05 Uncharted: The Lost Legacy
06 Night in the Woods
07 Nier: Automata
08 Pyre
09 What Remains of Edith Finch
10 Life is Strange: Before the Storm

Daniel Tack

01 Divinity: Original Sin II
02 PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds
03 Persona 5
04 What Remains of Edith Finch
05 Nioh
06 Cuphead
07 Hearthstone: Kobolds and Catacombs
08 Nier: Automata
09 World of Warcraft: Legion
10 Horizon Zero Dawn



Brian Shea

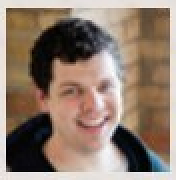
01 The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild
02 Super Mario Odyssey
03 Horizon Zero Dawn
04 Persona 5
05 Middle-earth: Shadow of War
06 Yakuza 0
07 Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus
08 Uncharted: The Lost Legacy
09 Cuphead
10 Destiny 2

Matthew Kato

01 **Horizon Zero Dawn**
02 Dirt 4
03 Pro Evolution Soccer 2018
04 Assassin's Creed Origins
05 Life is Strange: Before the Storm
06 The Golf Club 2
07 Football Manager 2018
08 Gran Turismo Sport
09 What Remains of Edith Finch
10 Madden NFL 18

Jeff Cork

01 **The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild**
02 Yakuza 0
03 Horizon Zero Dawn
04 Assassin's Creed Origins
05 Super Mario Odyssey
06 What Remains of Edith Finch
07 Path of Exile
08 Cuphead
09 Nier: Automata
10 Little Nightmares



Ben Reeves

01 **The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild**
02 Super Mario Odyssey
03 Metroid: Samus Returns
04 XCOM 2: War of the Chosen
05 Resident Evil 7: Biohazard
06 Pyre
07 Destiny 2
08 Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle
09 Heat Signature
10 Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus

Jeff Marchiafava

01 **Horizon Zero Dawn**
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04 Middle-earth: Shadow of War
05 PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds
06 Mario + Rabbids: Kingdom Battle
07 What Remains of Edith Finch
08 Prey
09 Assassin's Creed Origins
10 Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus

Kyle Hilliard

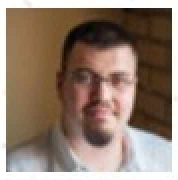
01 **The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild**
02 Super Mario Odyssey
03 Resident Evil 7: Biohazard
04 Metroid: Samus Returns
05 Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice
06 Horizon Zero Dawn
07 Hollow Knight
08 What Remains of Edith Finch
09 Heat Signature
10 Little Nightmares

Javy Gwaltney

01 **The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild**
02 Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus
03 Nier: Automata
04 Yakuza 0
05 PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds
06 XCOM 2: War of the Chosen
07 Persona 5
08 Super Mario Odyssey
09 Horizon Zero Dawn
10 What Remains of Edith Finch

Elise Favis

01 **Persona 5**
02 Super Mario Odyssey
03 Horizon Zero Dawn
04 Night in the Woods
05 What Remains of Edith Finch
06 Thimbleweed Park
07 Cuphead
08 Middle-earth: Shadow of War
09 Crash Bandicoot N. Sane Trilogy
10 Tacoma

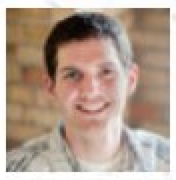


Suriel Vazquez

01 **The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild**
02 Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus
03 Night in the Woods
04 Cuphead
05 Yakuza 0
06 For Honor
07 Assassin's Creed Origins
08 Destiny 2
09 Pyre
10 Injustice 2

Imran Khan

01 **The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild**
02 Nier: Automata
03 Yakuza 0
04 Super Mario Odyssey
05 Cuphead
06 Persona 5
07 Horizon Zero Dawn
08 Assassin's Creed Origins
09 Sonic Mania
10 Battle Chef Brigade



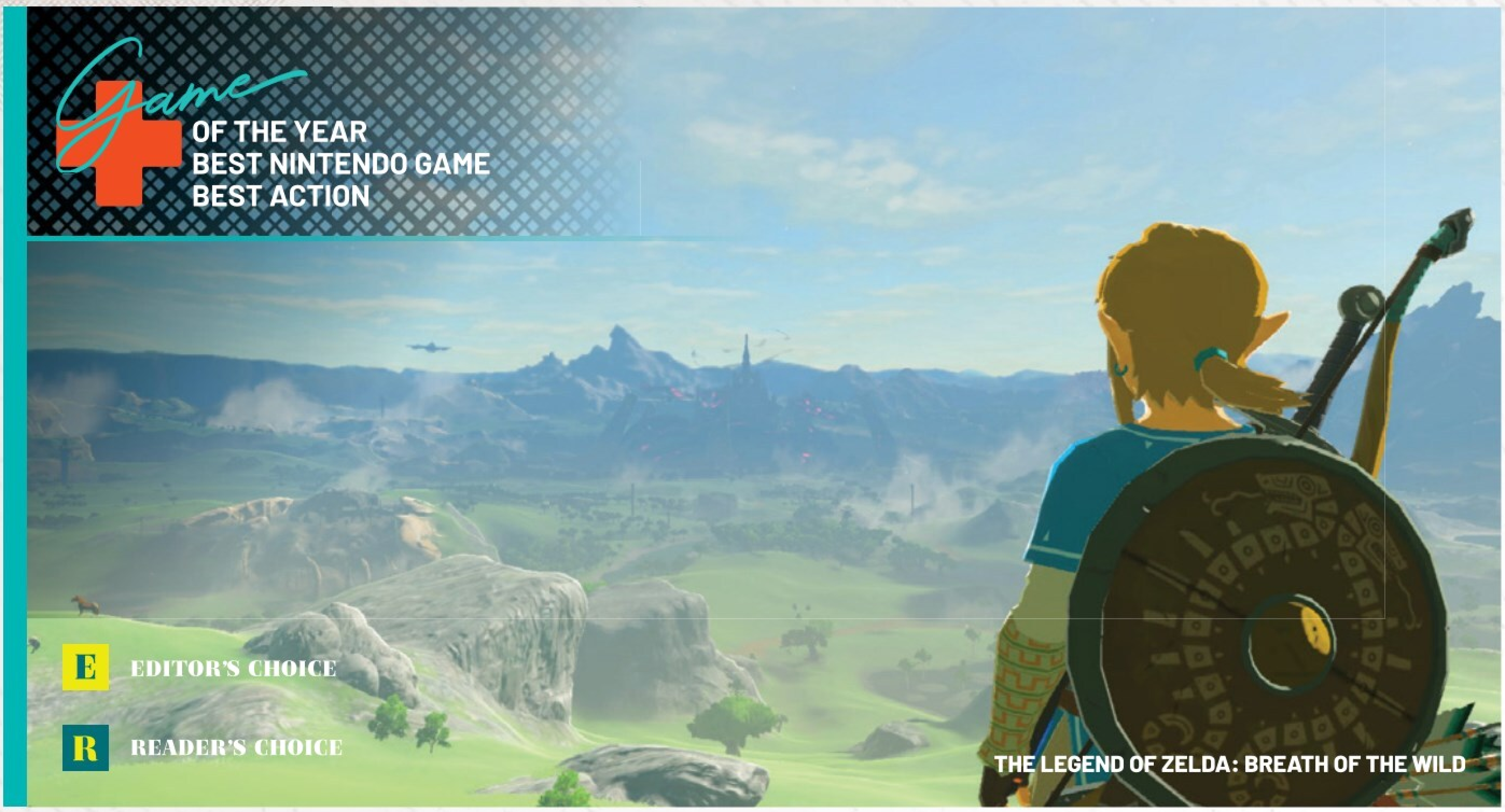
Ben Hanson

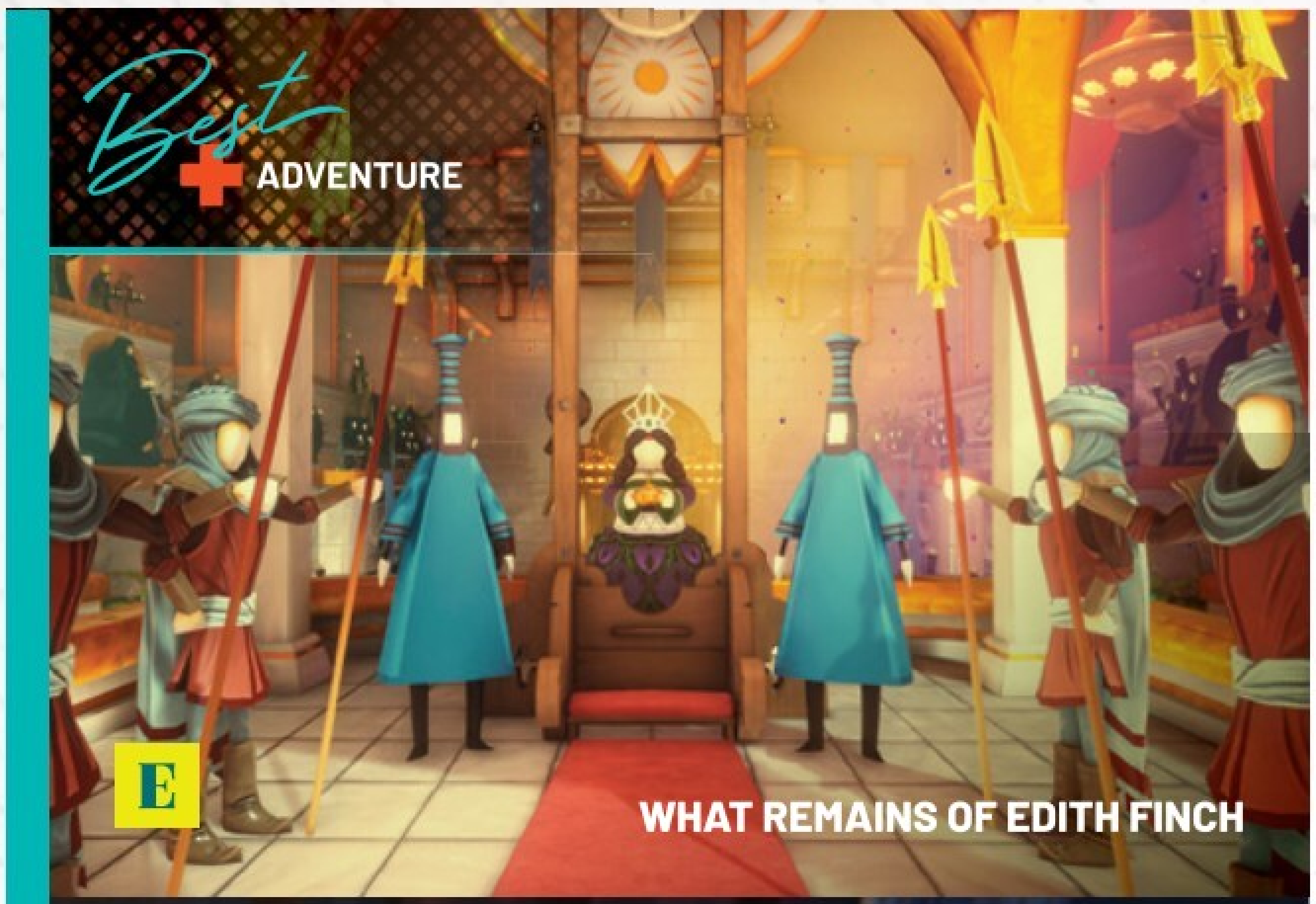
01 **The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild**
02 PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds
03 Super Mario Odyssey
04 Night in the Woods
05 South Park: The Fractured but Whole
06 What Remains of Edith Finch
07 Horizon Zero Dawn
08 Puyo Puyo Tetris
09 HQ
10 Uncharted: The Lost Legacy

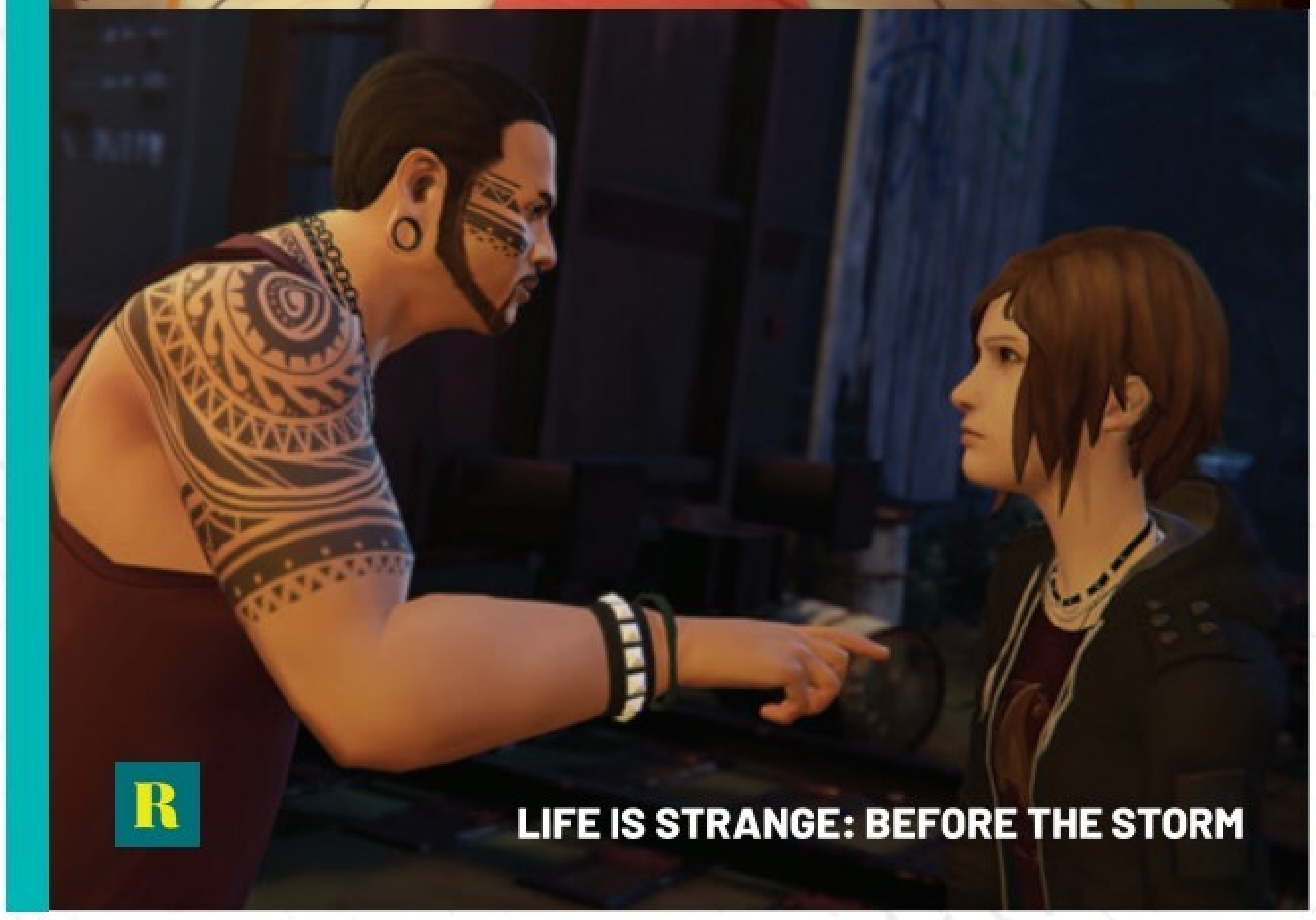
Leo Vader

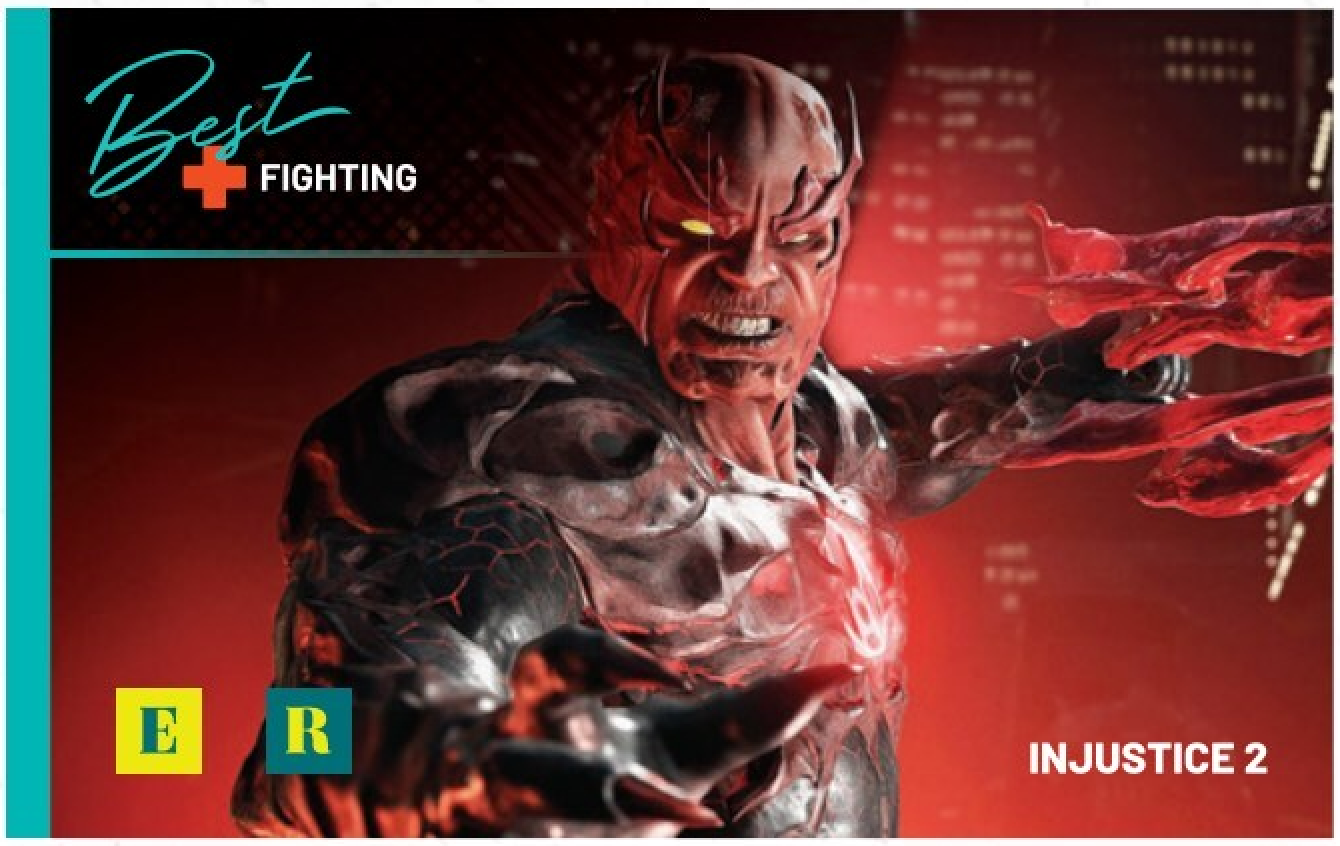
01 **Heat Signature**
02 PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds
03 Sniper Elite 4
04 Dropmix
05 Night in the Woods
06 The Sexy Brutale
07 Yakuza 0
08 The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild
09 Agents of Mayhem
10 Assassin's Creed Origins

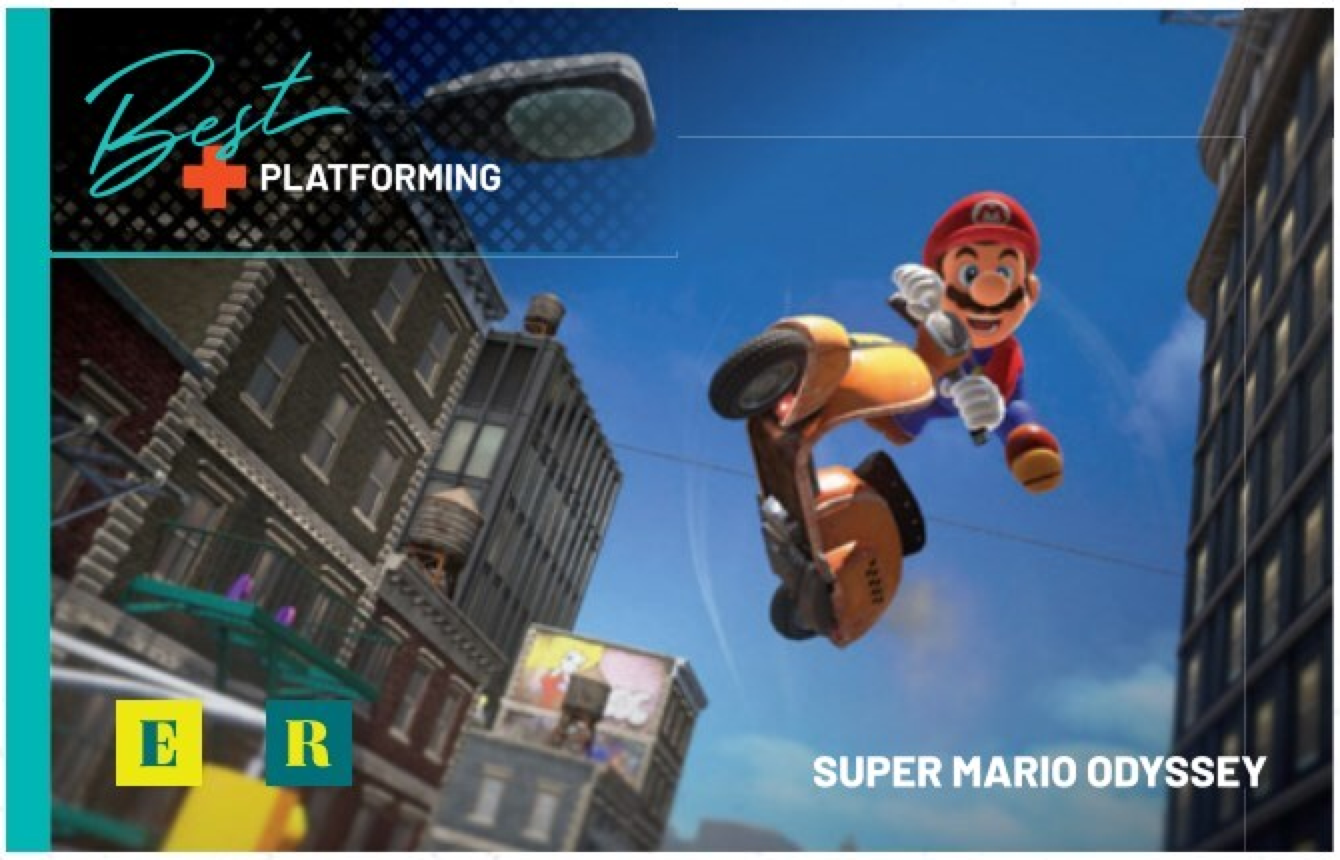
READER AND EDITOR GAMES OF THE YEAR


Game
OF THE YEAR
BEST NINTENDO GAME
BEST ACTION
E EDITOR'S CHOICE
R READER'S CHOICE
THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD

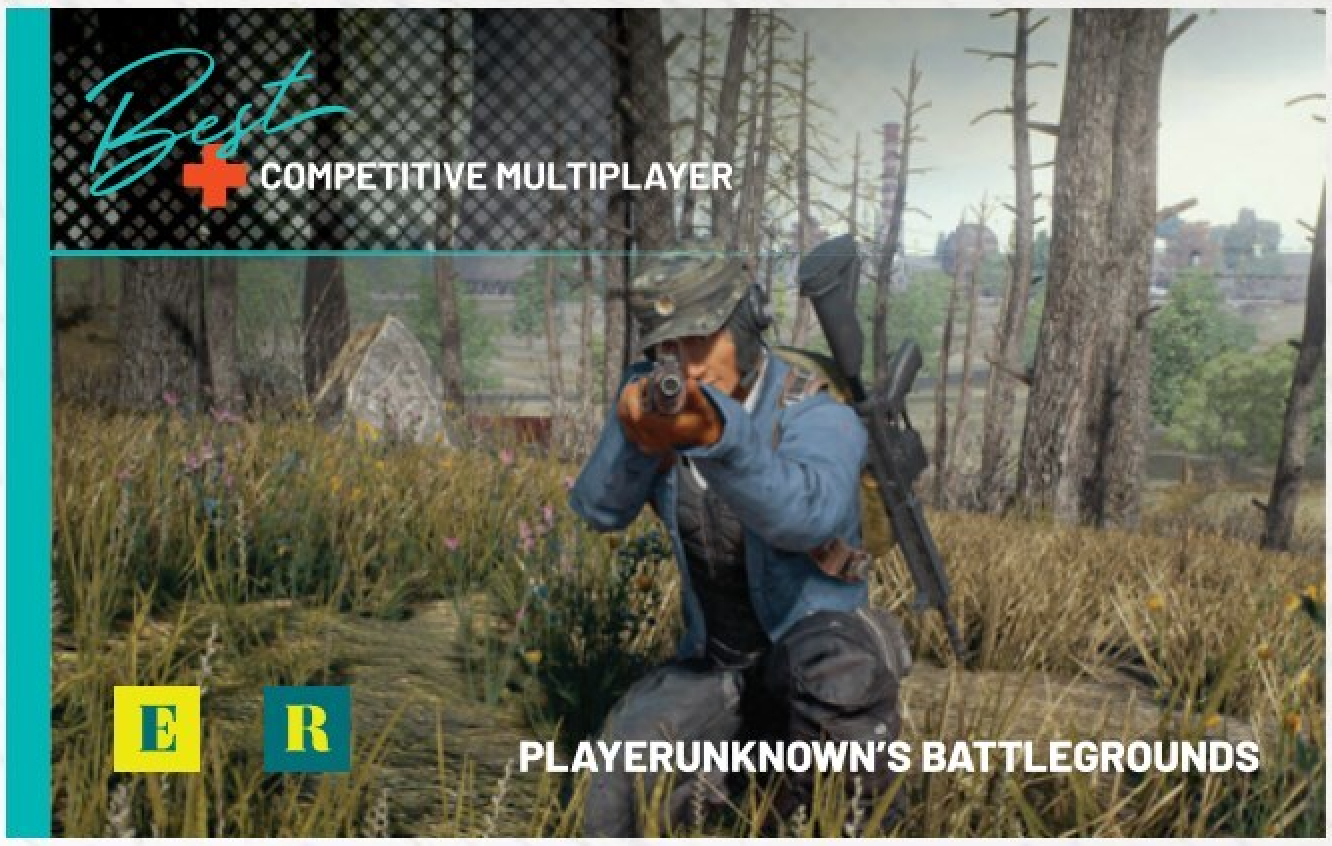

Best
ADVENTURE
E
WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH


R
LIFE IS STRANGE: BEFORE THE STORM


Best
FIGHTING
E
R
INJUSTICE 2

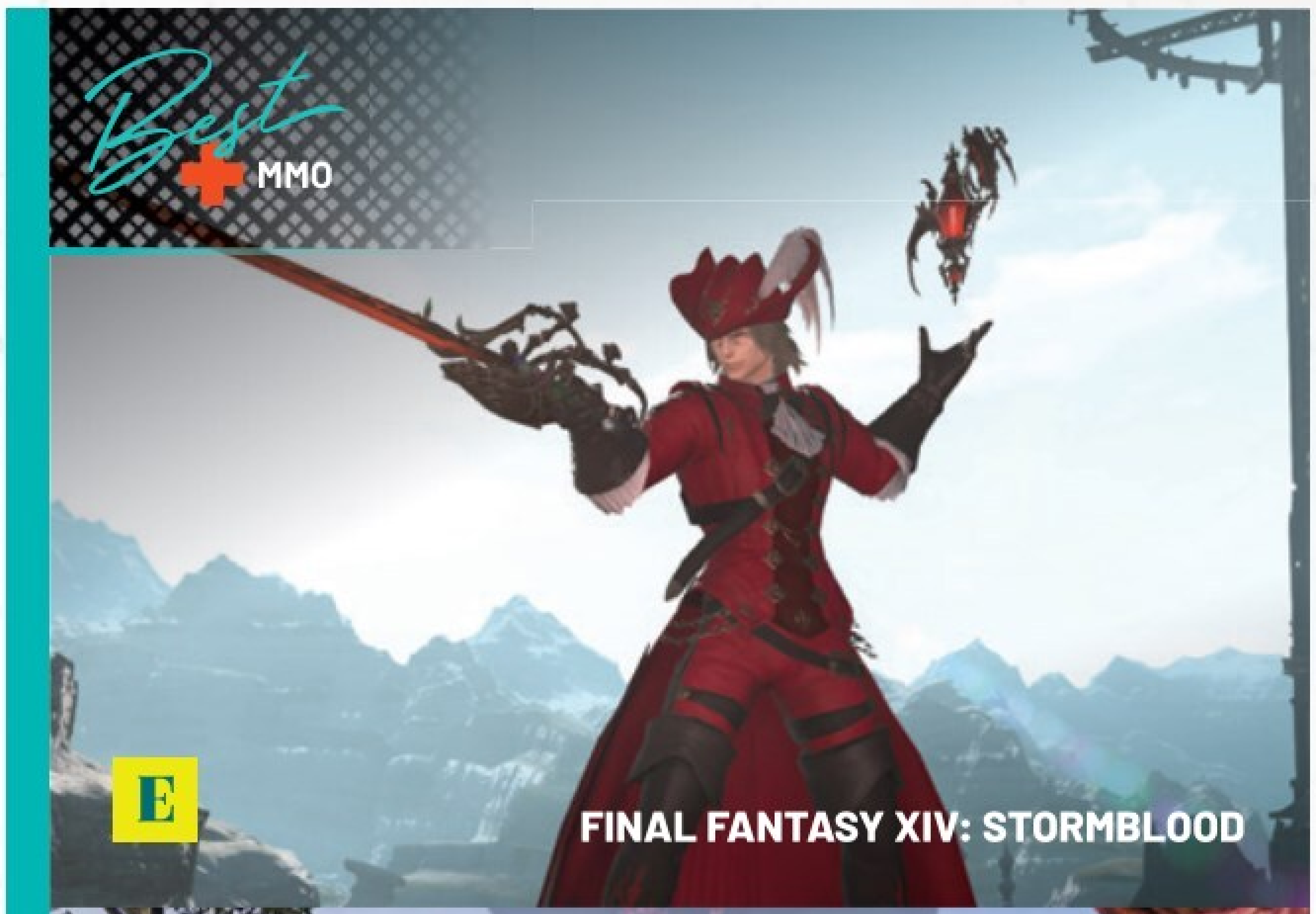

Best
PLATFORMING
E
R
SUPER MARIO ODYSSEY

Best COMPETITIVE MULTIPLAYER

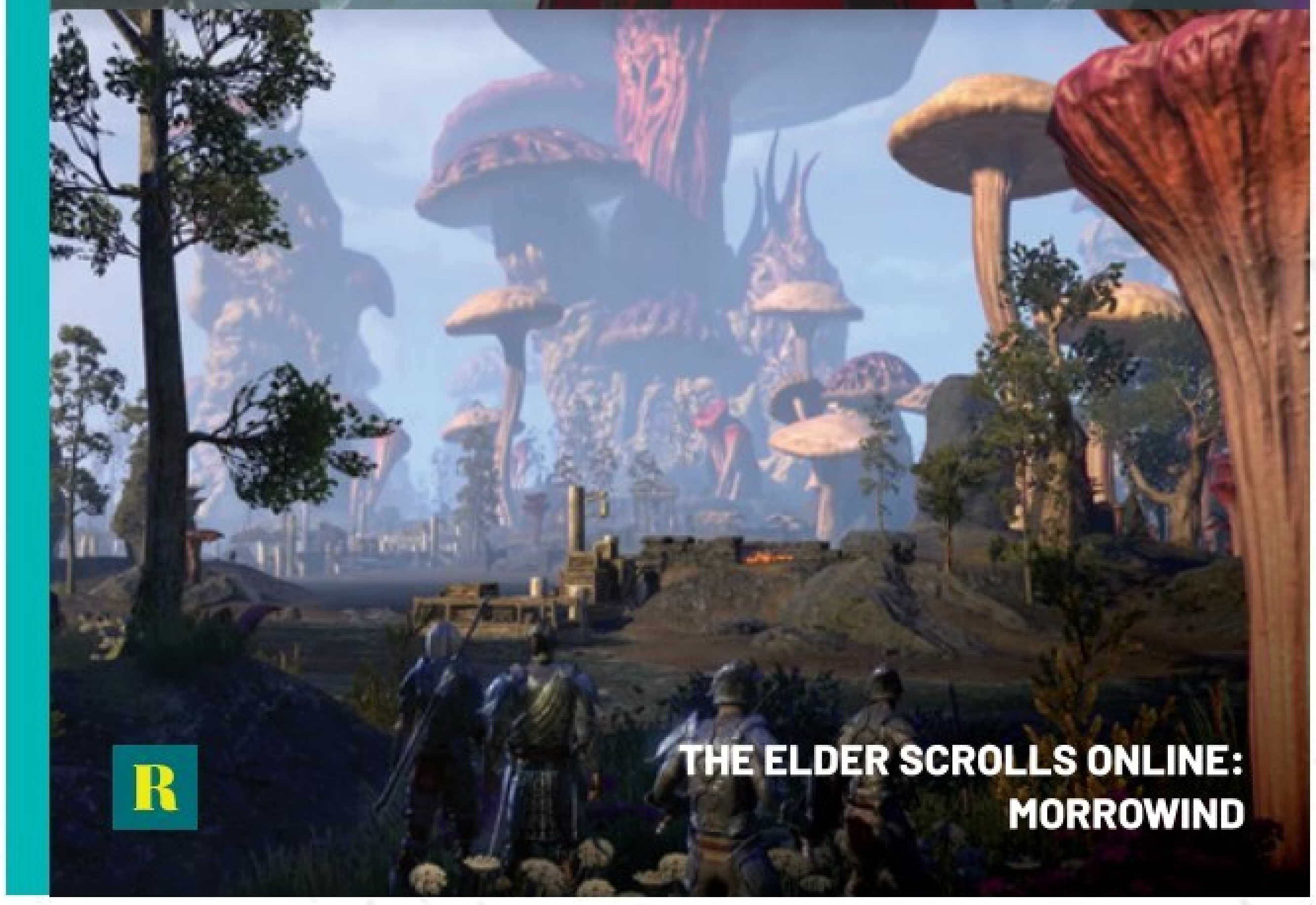


PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS

Best MMO



FINAL FANTASY XIV: STORMBLOOD



THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE: MORROWIND

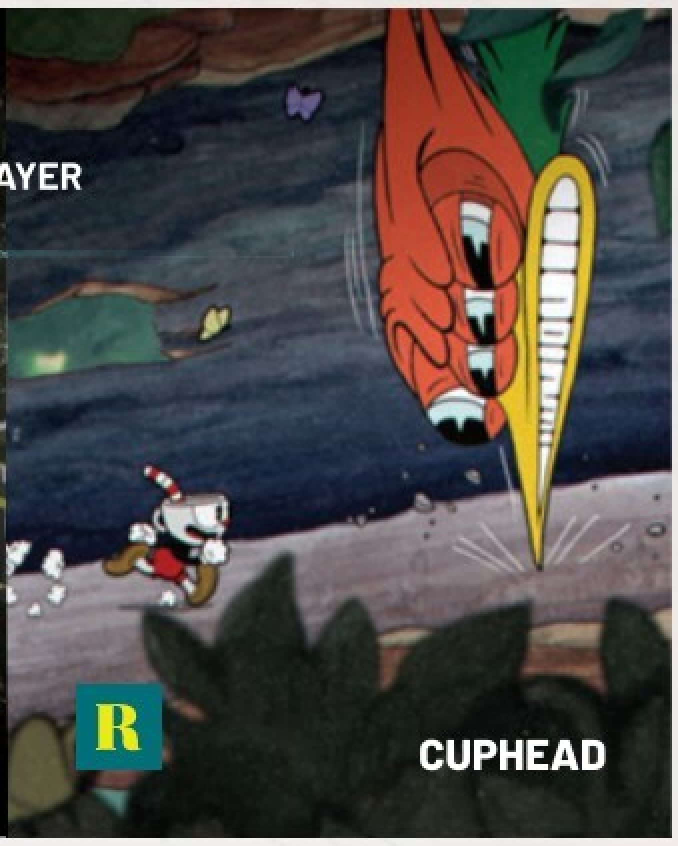
Best RACING

DIRT 4

FORZA MOTORSPORT 7

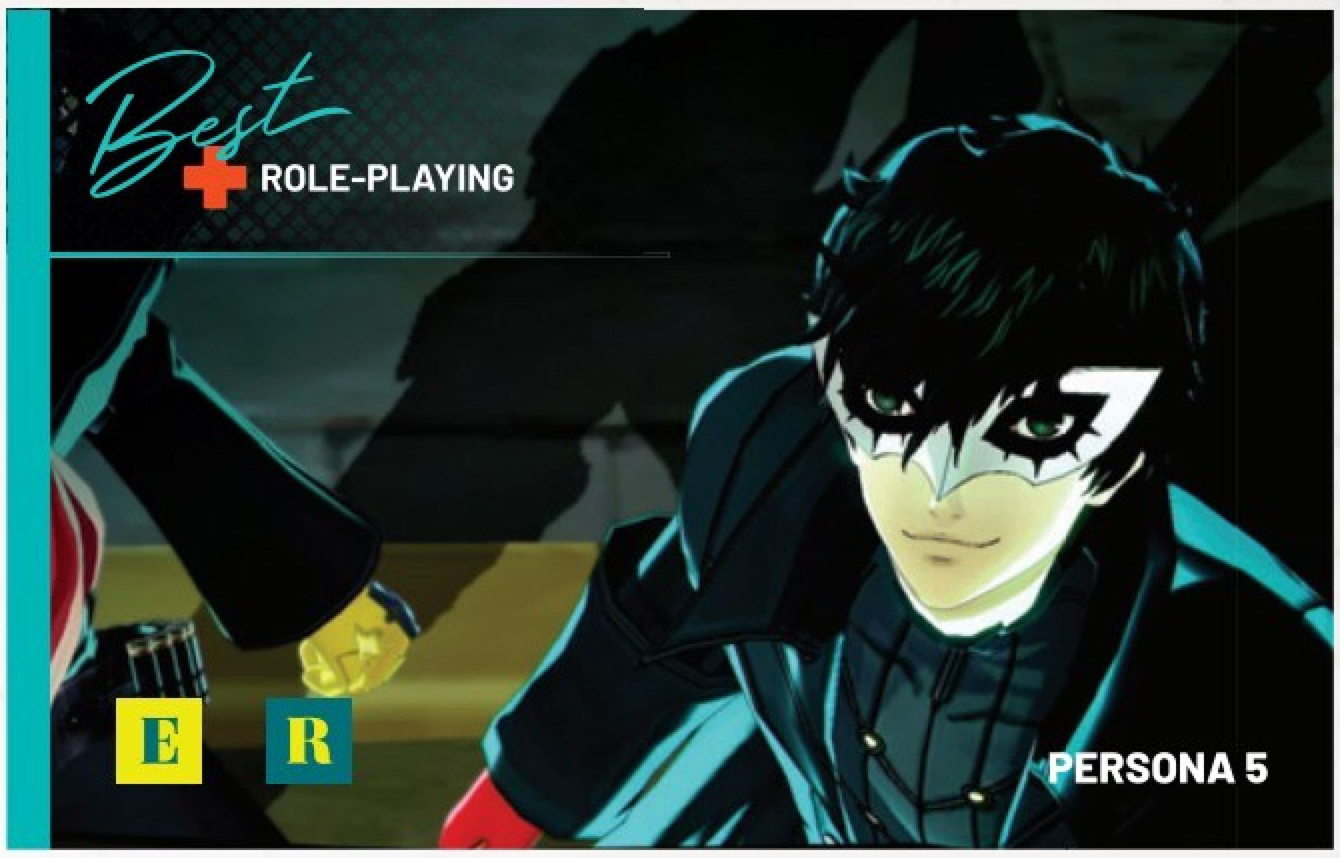
Best COOPERATIVE MULTIPLAYER

GHOST RECON WILDLANDS



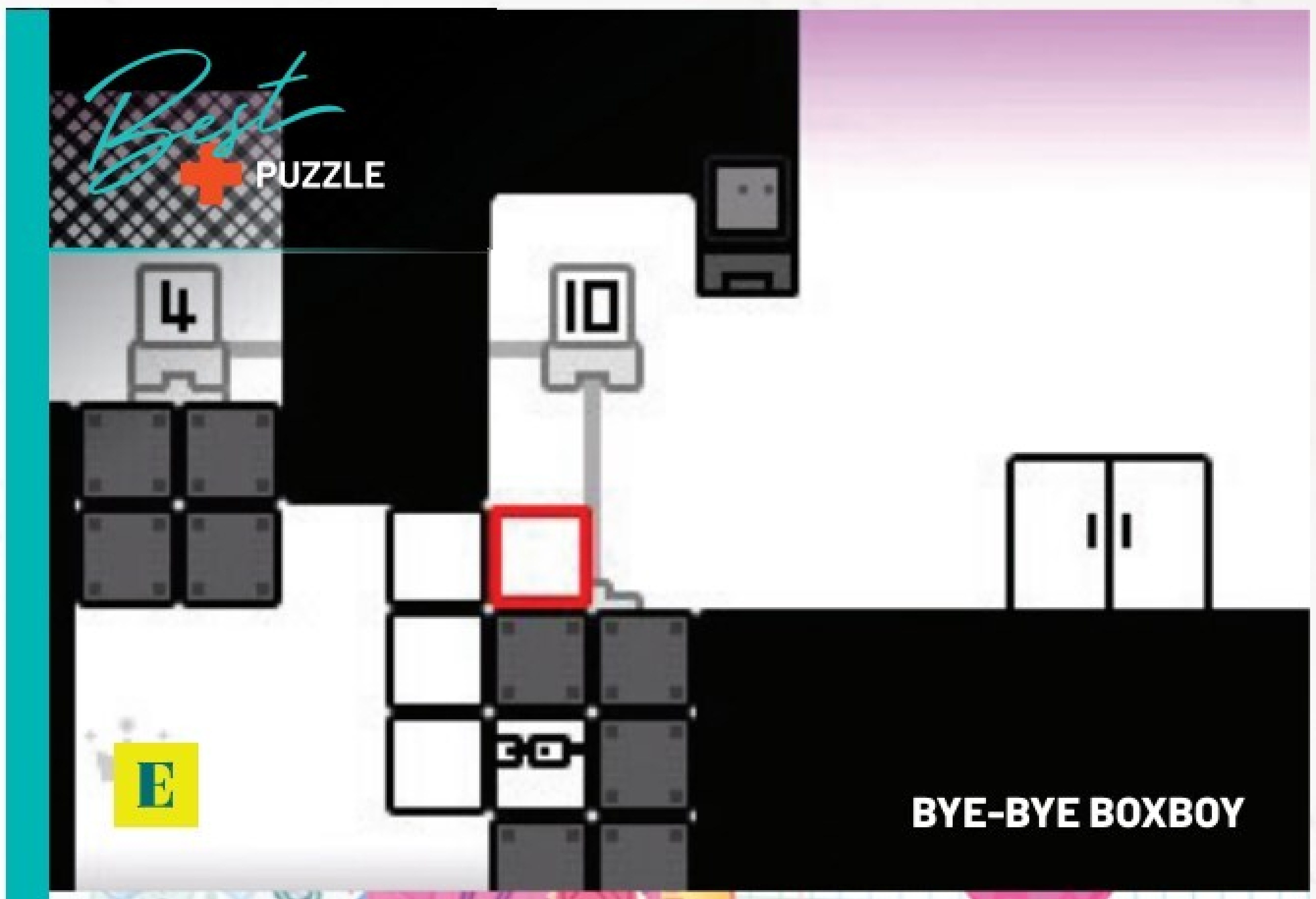
CUPHEAD

Best ROLE-PLAYING

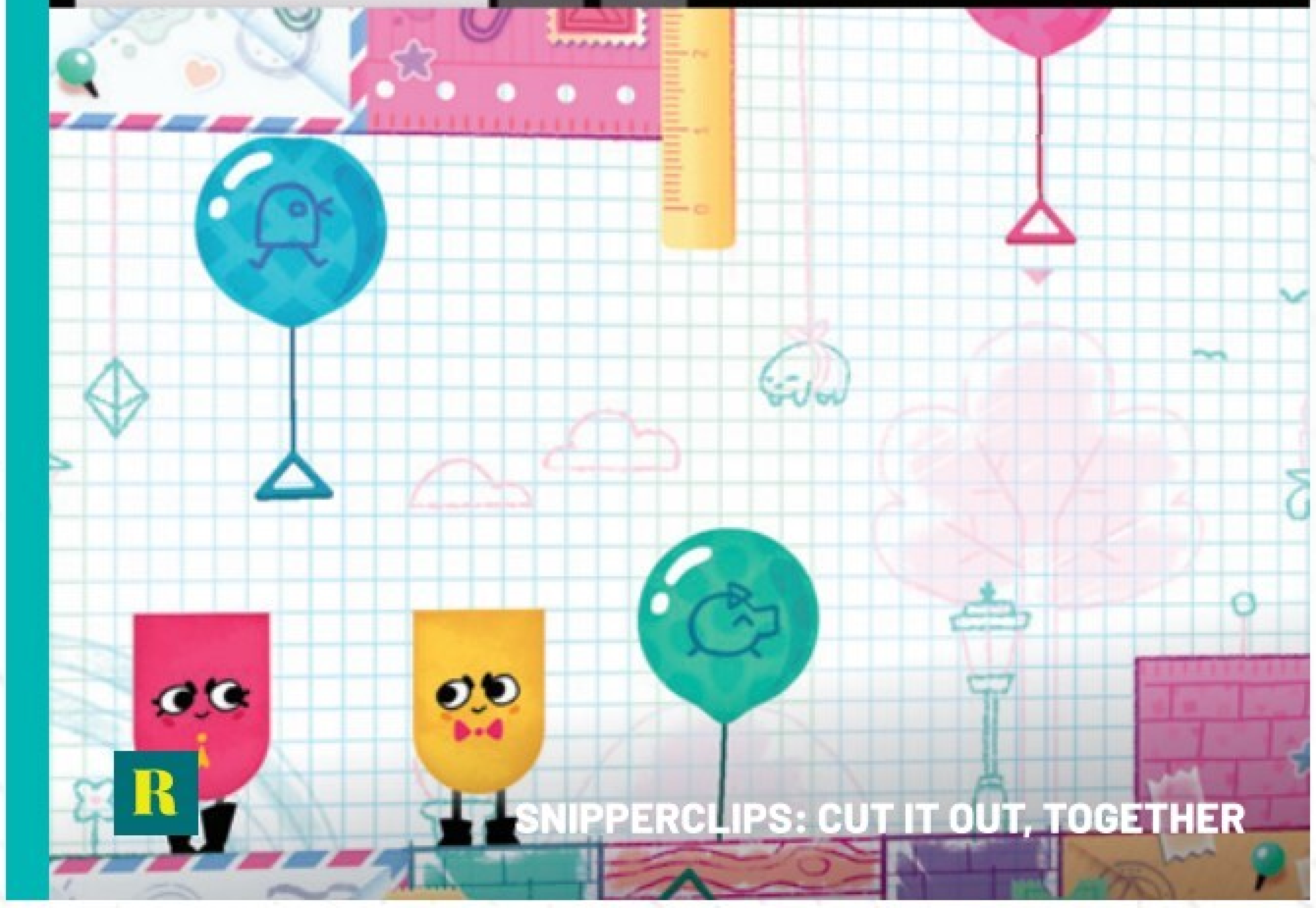


PERSONA 5

Best PUZZLE



BYE-BYE BOXBOY



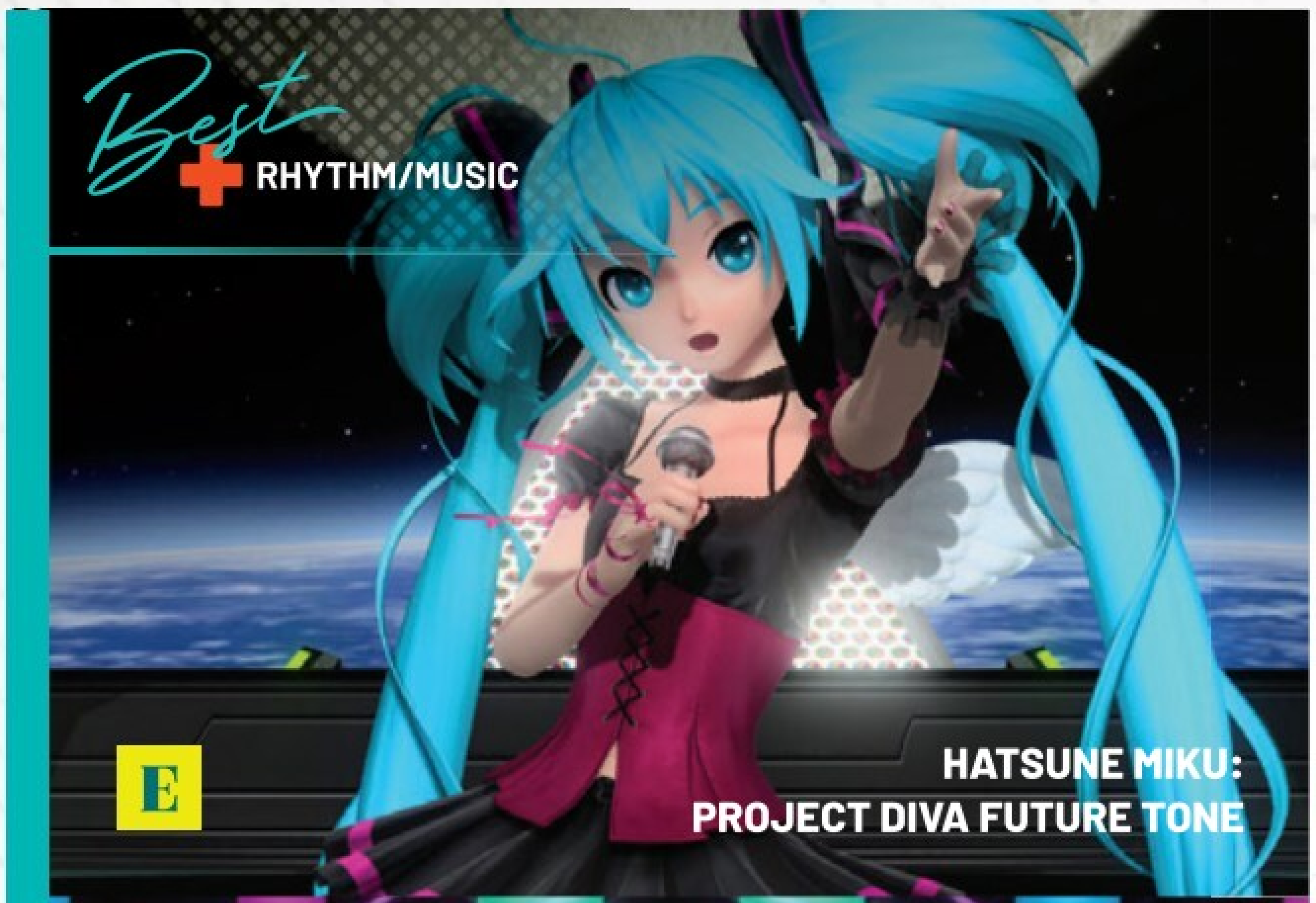
SNIPPERCLIPS: CUT IT OUT, TOGETHER

Best REMASTER

E FINAL FANTASY XII: THE ZODIAC AGE

R CRASH BANDICOOT N. SANE TRILOGY

Best RHYTHM/MUSIC



E HATSUNE MIKU: PROJECT DIVA FUTURE TONE

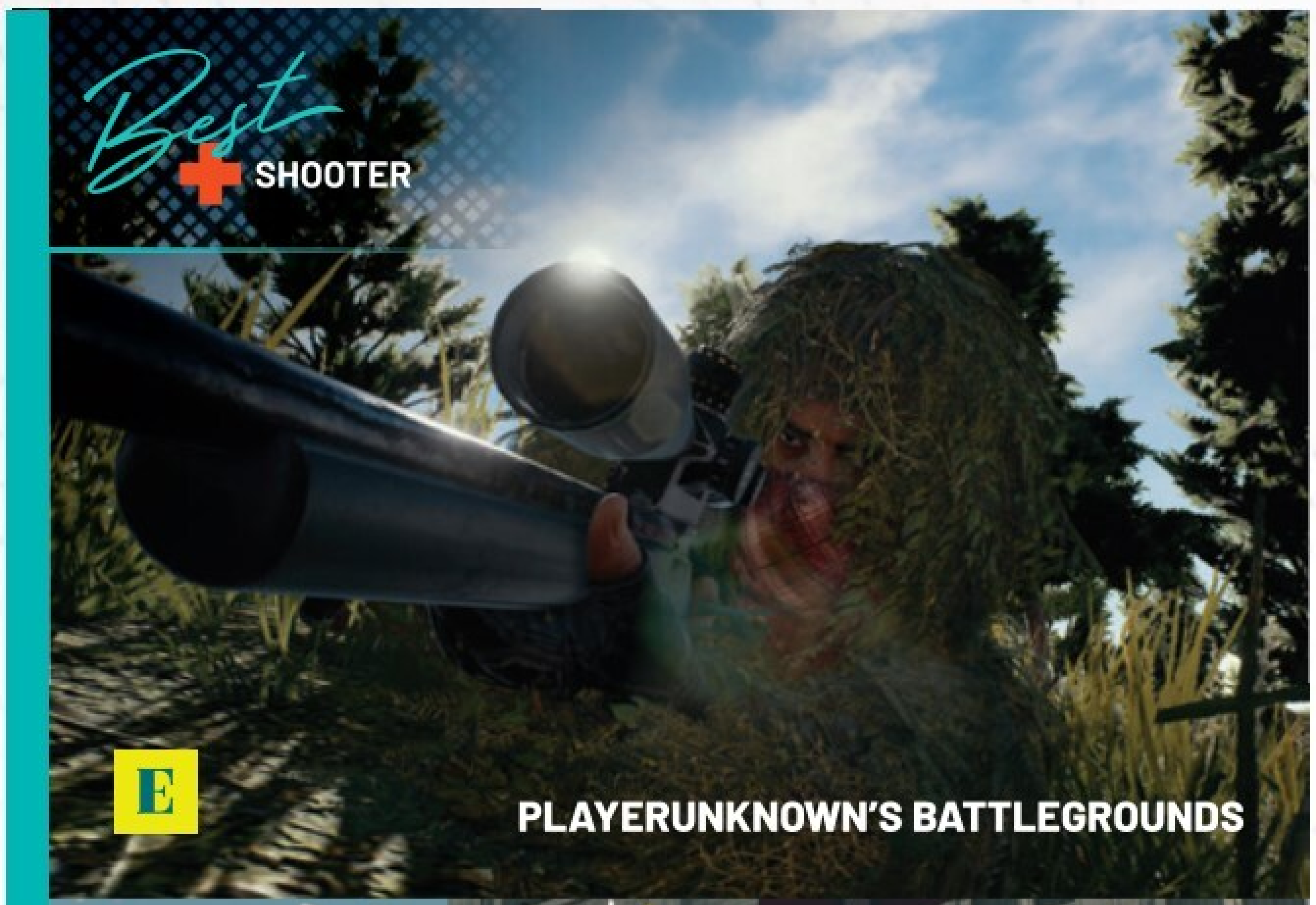
Jazzy
OK
Crazy
SUPER
Funky
SUPER
Sunny
GOOD

R JUST DANCE 2018

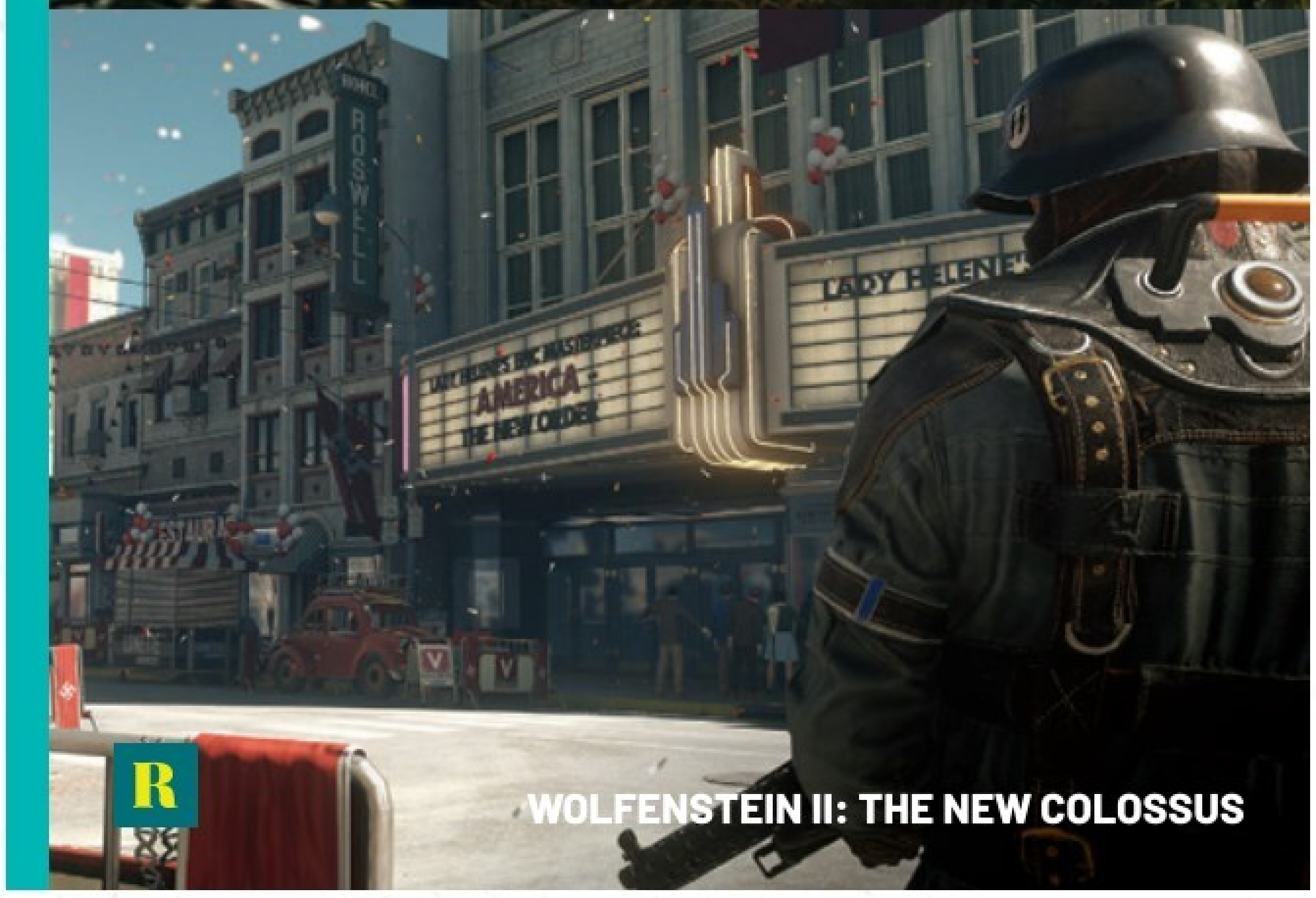
Best PC GAME

E **R** DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN II

Best SHOOTER



E PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS


ROSWELL
AMERICA
LADY HELENE

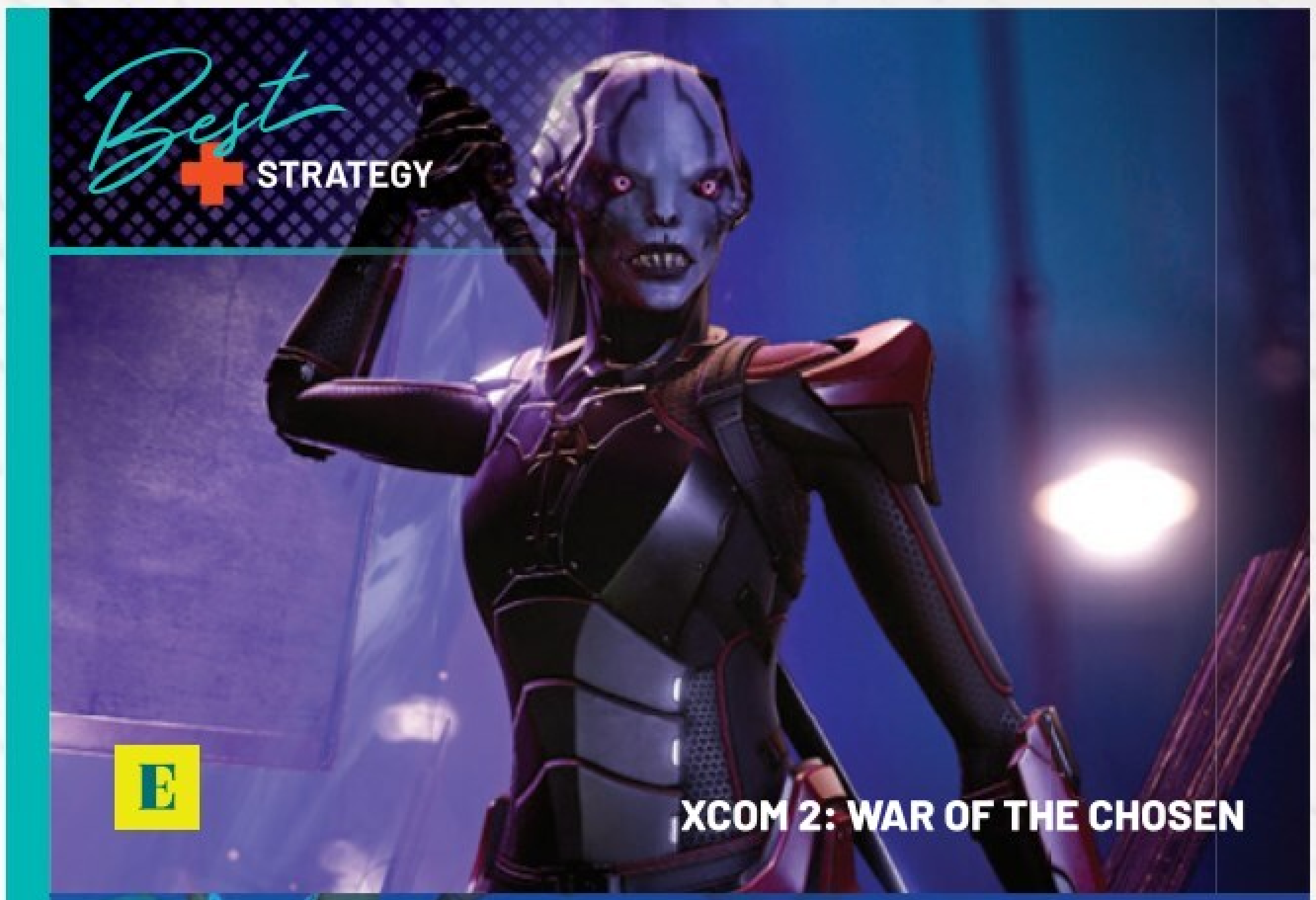
R WOLFENSTEIN II: THE NEW COLOSSUS

Best SPORTS

E NBA 2K18

R FIFA 18

Best STRATEGY



E XCOM 2: WAR OF THE CHOSEN

R MARIO + RABBIDS: KINGDOM BATTLE

Best MICROSOFT GAME

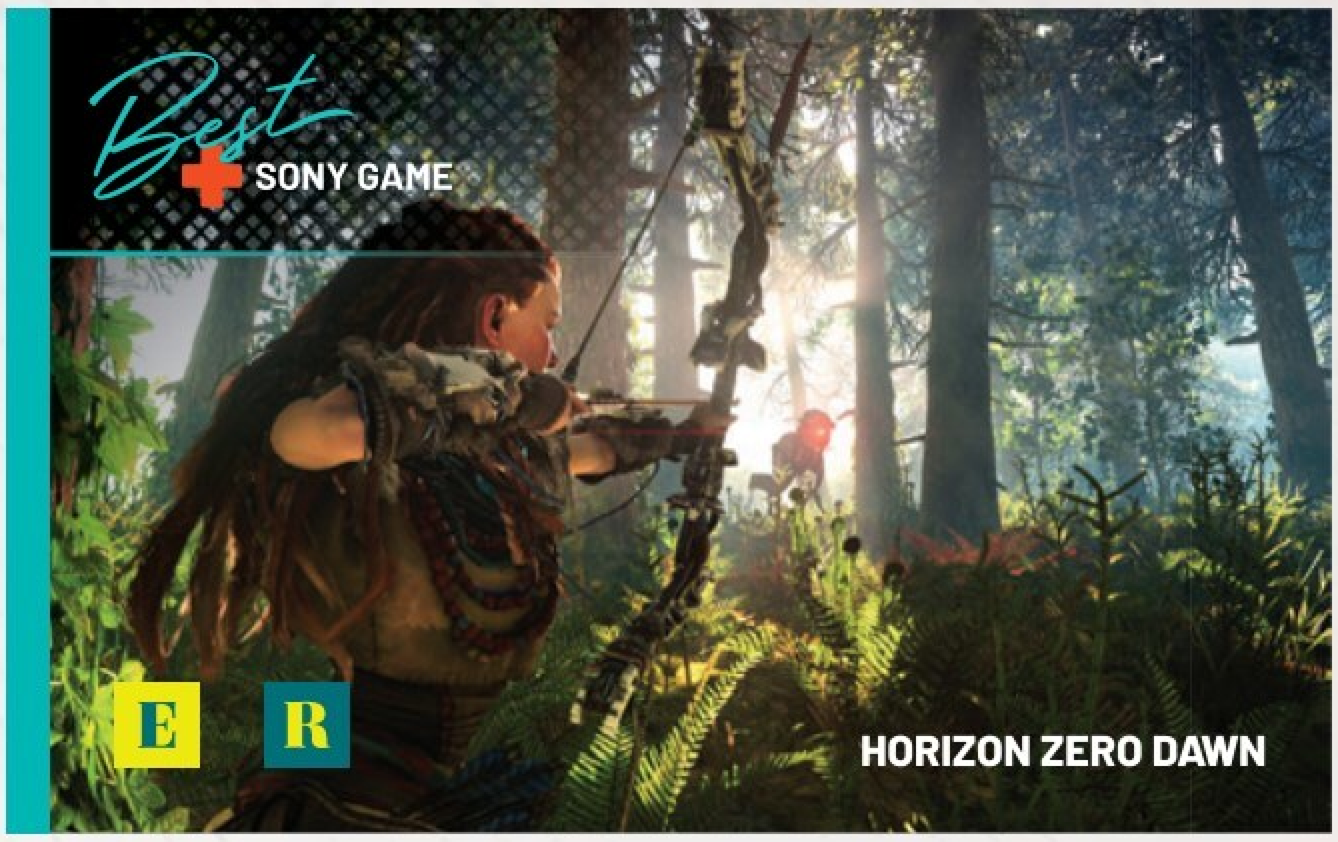
E **R** CUPHEAD

Best VIRTUAL REALITY

E ROBO RECALL

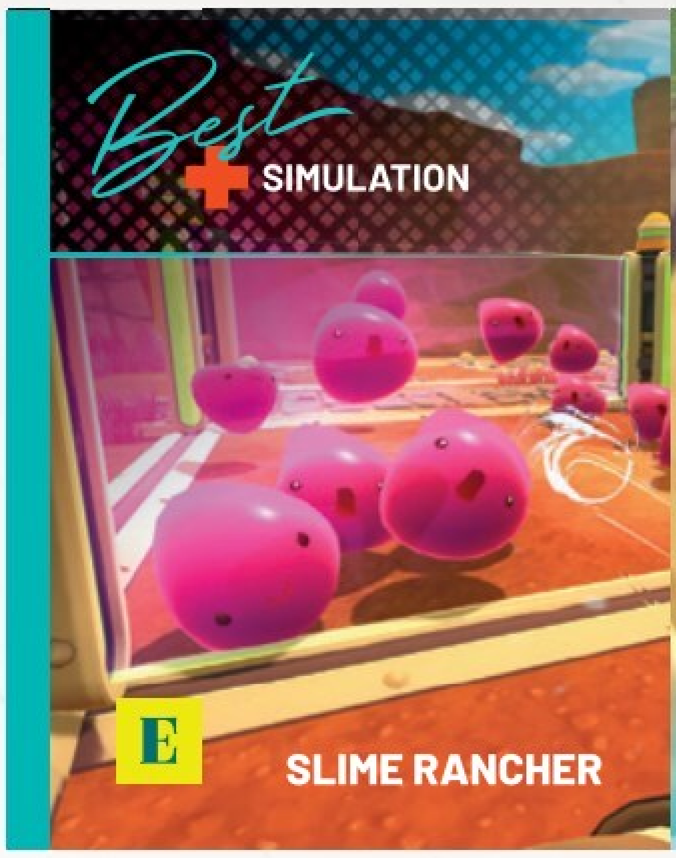
R RESIDENT EVIL 7: BIOHAZARD

Best SONY GAME



E **R** HORIZON ZERO DAWN

Best SIMULATION

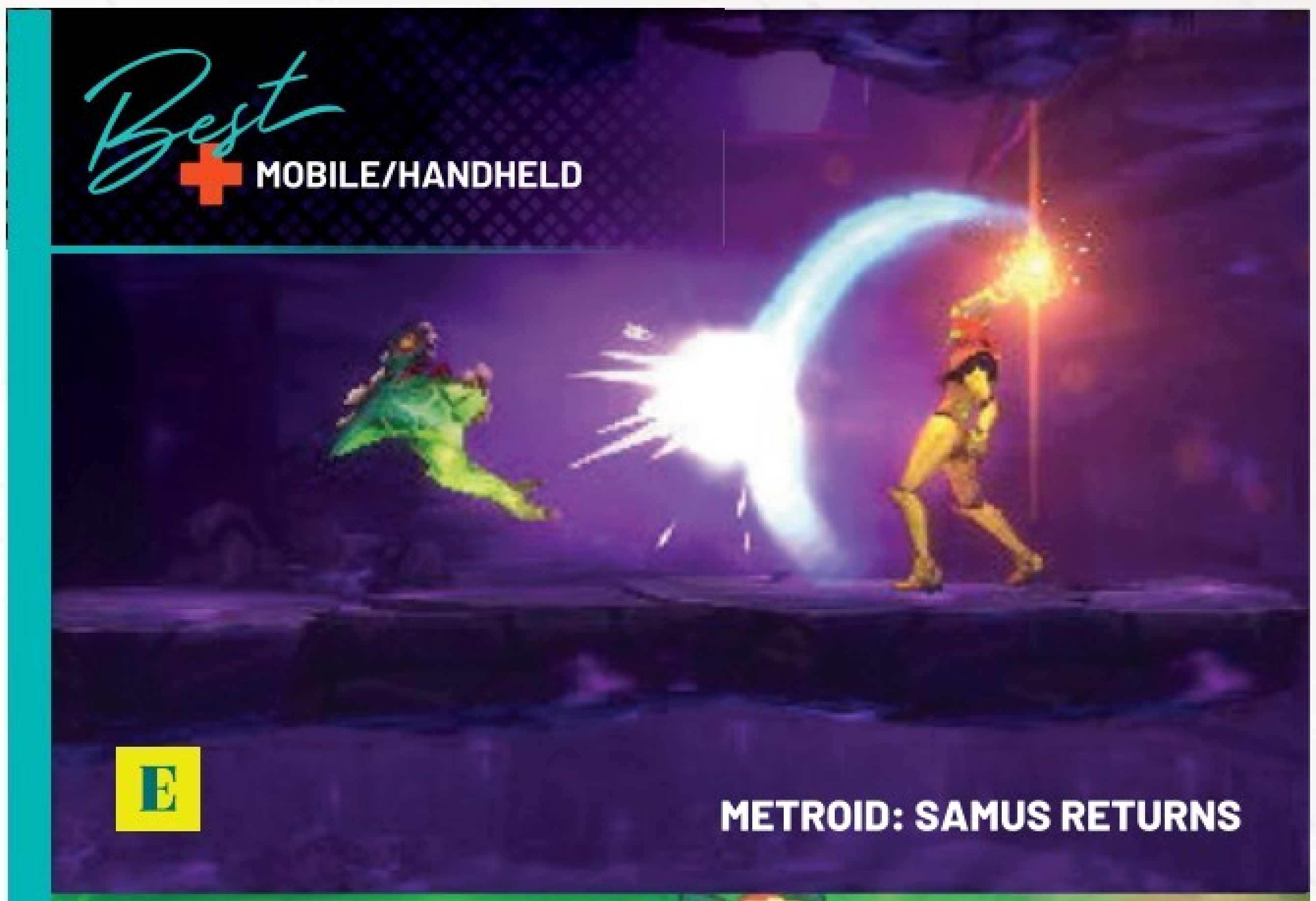


E SLIME RANCHER

horse mackerel

R ANIMAL CROSSING: POCKET CAMP

Best MOBILE/HANDHELD



E METROID: SAMUS RETURNS

R POKÉMON ULTRA SUN & ULTRA MOON

Dreams

A magical reawakening

» **Platform**
PS4

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Sony Interactive Entertainment

» **Developer**
Media Molecule

» **Release**
2018

Media Molecule's Dreams was one of the first games announced for PlayStation 4 at its reveal, dating back to PlayStation Meeting in 2013. Over the next couple of years, we received brief looks at this ambitious content-creation experience, with a beta promised to drop in 2016. Just when it seemed we would get a taste of what to expect from Dreams, things took a bad turn, as the beta was canceled and no release date was in sight.

After going dark for an extended period of time, Media Molecule marks today as a new coming out party, stating Dreams is locked in for launch at an unspecified time in 2018. The team spent the last two years working on simplifying the creation tools, getting them to a point where anyone should be able to pick up a controller and create art – that's the hope.

Although I didn't get my hands on Dreams, Media Molecule spent an hour walking me through the game's numerous avenues of play during a behind-closed-doors meeting at PlayStation Experience. The team's past success with LittleBigPlanet frequently came to mind, both in the creative dreamscapes that flashed into focus, and the design to continually reward players with new items that deepen the well of creative options at their fingertips.

The demo began with a look at a mode Media Molecule is loosely calling the "campaign," a story-driven experience called Art's Dream that weaves together three short stories based in childhood fantasy, science-fiction, and film noir worlds. All three stories are connected somehow, but the player won't know exactly how until they progress deeper within each. The tale begins with two cute characters, Foxy and Francis, riding a dragon through the clouds, landing, and deciding to play hide and seek. At this point in the game, Media Molecule is fully embracing the meaning of "childhood," almost making Dreams look like it is being developed exclusively with a younger audience in mind. Most of the challenges range from simple jumping exercises to flicking motions to open things like Russian nesting dolls and boxes. As Foxy and Francis quest to find their dragon in hiding, they collect prize bubbles that hold items players can use in the building modes, just like in LittleBigPlanet.

The player can freely control Francis or Foxy (pressing the triangle button to switch between them), but can also control a customizable cursor called an Imp to highlight and interact with things in the environment. The Imp is used throughout the entire game – from menu management to making music – and is a key part of how Dreams supports numerous game styles. After locating the dragon, which sadly ends with him being caged by an unknown entity, the game immediately shifts to the noir setting, where the gameplay changes to point and click. The childhood vibe washes away and is replaced by darker, more serious tones.

This dramatic shift follows a character named Art, who is searching for a woman. He's trying to find a way aboard a train to further pursue her. Like most point-and-click titles, the player must scour the environment for things to study and interact with. The search in this instance leads to a piano with luggage next to it. Using the Imp to investigate, a flick of the wrist opens a suitcase, holding a doll. This isn't just any doll, it's a doll of Francis (from the previous story we were just in). Opening the top of the piano reveals a string that seems random, but is quickly used in a trade with a musician who needs the string for her banjo. She gives Art a train ticket in exchange.

The story then shifts back to more childhood fantasy gameplay, which features stunning backdrops inspired by the work of artist Tyrus Wong, known for his work on Disney's *Bambi*. This second look at the world is filled with platforming peril, but

doesn't last long, as the viewpoint again shifts, this time to the sci-fi setting, where we see a robot named D-Bug unleashing electrical charges to light up the world and create passage to new areas. This area is again stunning in detail, and Media Molecule representatives are quick to point out that everything we are seeing in the campaign was created using in-game systems. No additional development tools were used to enhance any of it.

Media Molecule says players can weave together their own adventures using the creation tools, and even auto-surf through the community's creations, which can pull together random stories into one arc. Players will also be able to search for the type of content they want, such as game types, or even artists.

I then get a brief look at the creation tools that are available at launch. For the sake of time, no items were created from scratch, but I did see just how deep this experience can be in a small pre-made area, consisting of little more than a floating island and a wooden path on it. Using just the pre-assigned controller inputs, parts of the island get grabbed, moved, resized, duplicated, and even animated. Activating a "record" function, any motion the player makes is animated. I watch a Media Molecule designer hit record, pick up a piece of the wooden path, move it in the air back and forth, and then stop the recording. When he drops in a character, the wooden path moves back and forth, creating an aerial platforming challenge. Media Molecule continually stresses that most of the tools are easy to use, but it looks like the learning curve will be extensive.

Our demo ends with a look at how music and sounds can be created. For anyone that has used Garage Band and Pro Tools, Media Molecule has built something similar, allowing for music to be compiled and edited quickly. Players can import their own sounds freely, and an extensive library of instruments and sounds is also provided. Within seconds we watched a song come to life and play as a character jumped across the platform.

Dreams is a significantly deeper and more ambitious project than LittleBigPlanet. Players aren't just tasked to make a game – they can freely create whatever they want, whether it's a painting or an entire open world. Media Molecule offers up a wide variety of avenues to creation, whether it's starting with a blank canvas or entering someone else's creation to either add to it or see how it was created. All content shows a genealogy of who created it. Players can also make projects that numerous collaborators can work on, much like a game development team. So if you are great at art, yet stink at animation, you may find a community member that can help you bring your vision to life.

The demo made me want to try my hand at creating something, but sadly, I didn't get the chance to play it. The big question surrounding Dreams is just how easy it is to create. Media Molecule believes people will be able to jump right in, but I also heard that about LittleBigPlanet, yet struggled to create anything meaningful without first dedicating a wealth of time to understanding the basics.
» **Andrew Reiner**

Far Cry 5

Waging war in the American heartland

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Shooter
(2-Player Online)

» Publisher
Ubisoft

» Developer
Ubisoft Montreal

» Release
March 27

When Far Cry 5 was revealed, Ubisoft emphasized the game's story, painting a world where an evangelical cult has taken over a Montana town by force. The primary art portrays the charismatic cult leader in the center of a Last Supper tableau, indicating that nothing is truly sacred in the terrifyingly realistic nightmare world.

The preacher, who his followers call Father, rules over his flock with equal parts brutality and comfort. He sits atop the Project of Eden's Gate, the doomsday cult that has taken over the town. The cult is converting people by force, with non-believers left riddled with bullets face down in a ditch, leading to unrest from a population that fears their time is coming.

At the outset, Far Cry 5 presents you with a choice: the gender of your avatar. Far Cry 5 lacks the identifiable protagonist like Far Cry 3's Jason Brody or Far Cry 4's Ajay Ghale, instead opting for a silent soldier. The demo begins just after a major neighborhood has been freed from Project of Eden's Gate's rule, opening the way for a newly founded resistance hub to launch its counter-offensive.

NPC rebels wander the neighborhood of their own volition, offering side missions and intel that helps you gain ground against the enemy militia. These tasks provide new weapons, vehicles, or partners for the cause. The comrades typically ask your character to help save them from danger, then pledge their loyalty to you and your mission, allowing you to call on them whenever you need help.

One of the first available missions has the owner of a pumpkin farm emphatically asking your character to check out her dog, Boomer, who is restless and spooked. By the time you arrive, Boomer has been locked in a cage by the ne'er-do-wells of Eden's Gate, who are mocking the dog through the bars. After some careful shotgun blasts and inevitable reinforcements that ruin the day, the dog joins your crew as a partner, staying by your side as long as he is assigned.

Everything in the game can be done with a co-op partner, even side missions

Another mission wins you a more bombastic, but decidedly less cute, partner. A local aviation nut's family airplane has been stolen by the cult, so they can drop bombs on targets. The pilot was planning to take the plane and his pregnant wife out of Montana, but needs your help to get the plane back. Upon retrieving the plane, the pilot is emboldened to join the resistance, and your character helps him protect his home. Calling on his aid rains down hell on your enemies.

A third partner asks you to retrieve her father's semi-truck, a big rig designed for ramming. Arriving on the scene, I sic Boomer on an enemy. After another cult member notices the attack, he fires a shot that accidentally opens the cage on the wolf being kept in the area. Scrambling up a ladder, we watch from the safety of a nearby roof as the wolf tears through the entire camp of his own volition.

From there, it is a simple matter of taking the gargantuan truck back to the resistance base. Project of Eden's Gate ineffectually puts up road blocks to impede your path, forcing the game to highlight the makeshift barriers and simply prompt you to ram right through. It is cathartic on its own, but is enhanced by the revelation that there are machine guns installed in the truck's grill.

Far Cry 5 is also doubling down on cooperative online play, which is supported across the entire campaign. Players can team up to take the fight to the cult by riding vehicles and separating as they see fit. Alongside a co-op partner, I took on story missions, captured enemy camps, and generally just played however I desired.

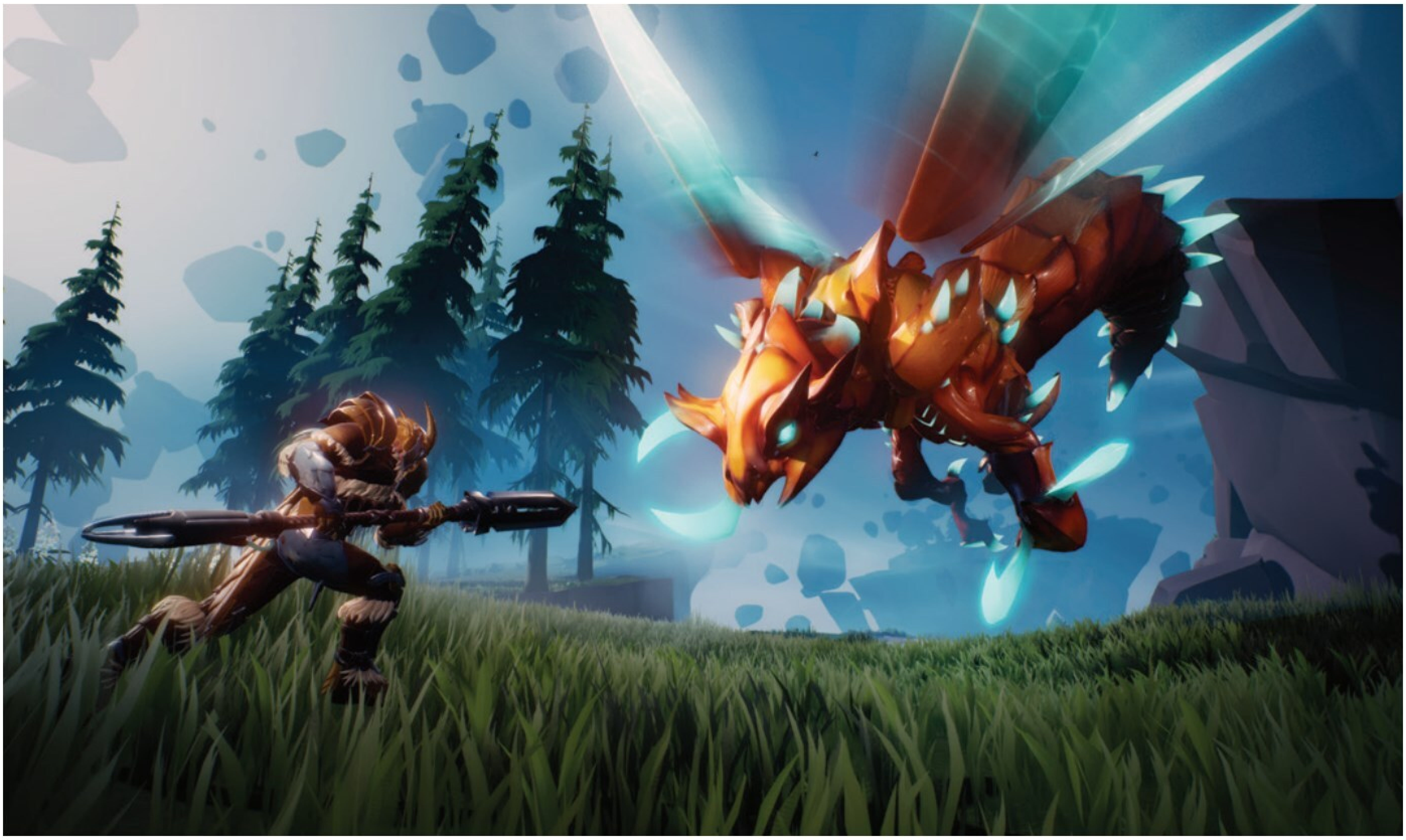
One mission had us clearing out a farm of cult members and animals they poisoned in order to taint the food supply. After deciding to go in loud, the other player began screaming about a bear that had also found its way down into the battle. A single rocket solved that problem, allowing the time for the two of us to chase after pigs with shotguns around the fenced in pen.

After a one-month delay, the development team is eager to polish the game to a shine before it debuts. Let's hope the extra time pays off.
» **Imran Khan**

Help people around the area to gain their aid in the form of airstrikes on the enemy

Dauntless

Here be monsters



» Platform
PC

» Style
1 to 4-Player Online Action

» Publisher
Phoenix Labs

» Developer
Phoenix Labs

» Release
TBA

Dauntless is making sweeping renovations moving into 2018 and preparing the timeline for its open beta and release. The monster-hunting PC action title adds some delicious new customization for weapons, a new weapon class that features ranged elements and a high skill cap, and of course, new dangerous denizens to hunt down and slay for parts to make new gear.

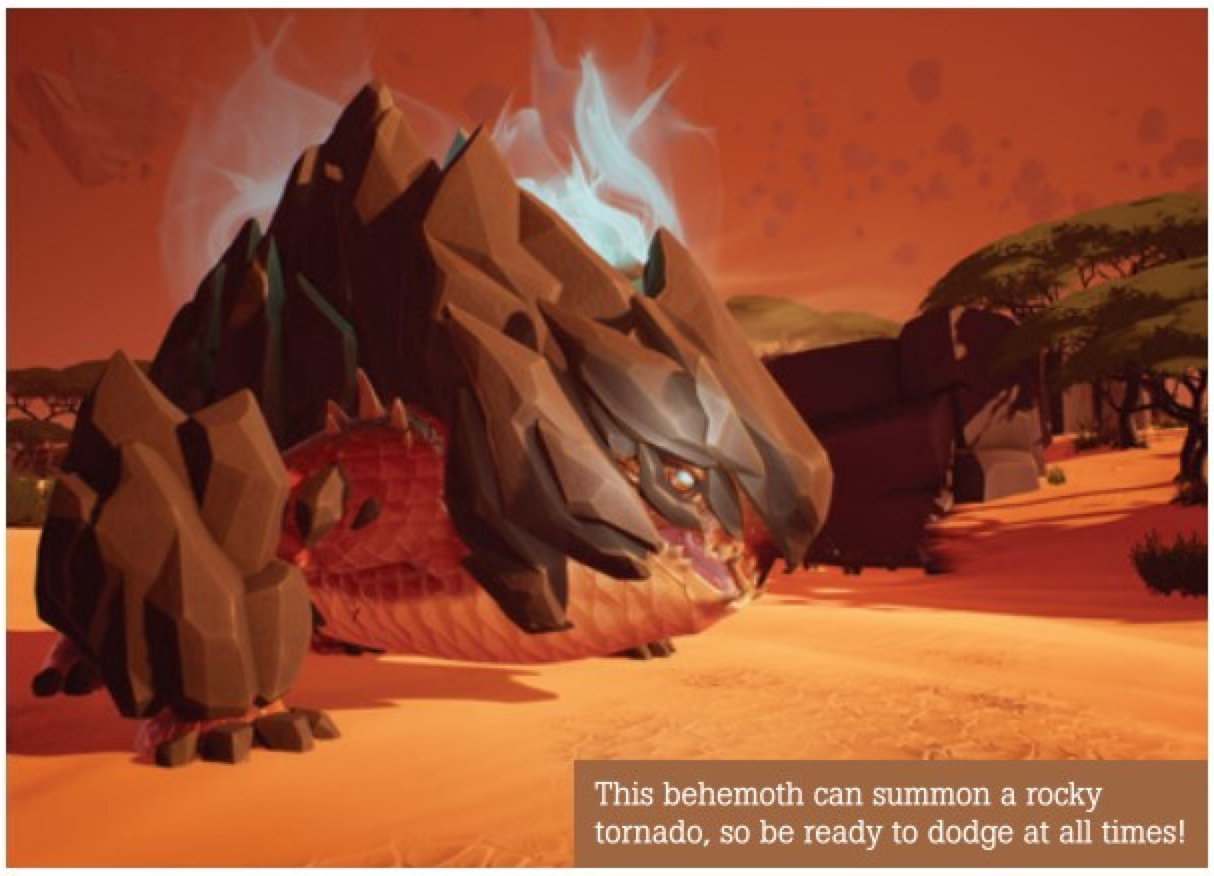
The War Pike offers something for the behemoth hunter who wants a bit of finesse in their hacking and slashing, combined with a potent ranged attack. When charging up the War Pike by tearing into an opponent, you can bank ranged shots. Be warned, if you get so much as touched during the charge up period, you must start powering up that shot all over, so there's a lot of skill involved in knowing when to get in, when to strike, when to bank, and when to back off and let loose with an incredibly long-ranged missile shot that can deliver serious damage. The shot itself also has a timing window, so the War Pike is truly a weapon for a fighter that wants to min/max every second of play.

Dauntless was lacking in the customization department during its early iterations, but those days are over. Customizing your character's look is a nice addition, but the real fun begins with the cell system. Weapons and armor can be socketed with cells that offer substantial boons. Hunting down cells that suit your playstyle and build can offer significant benefits – get big damage boosts that reward skilled combo play, or forge a set of gear to help the entire group, letting you perform triage on downed players. If you're a seasoned player who just loves to show off, you can deck yourself out with gems that reward timing windows and perfect play. If you're less than perfect, there are tons of other options that can augment your damage or survivability out in the field. Phoenix Labs will reveal more about these at a later date.

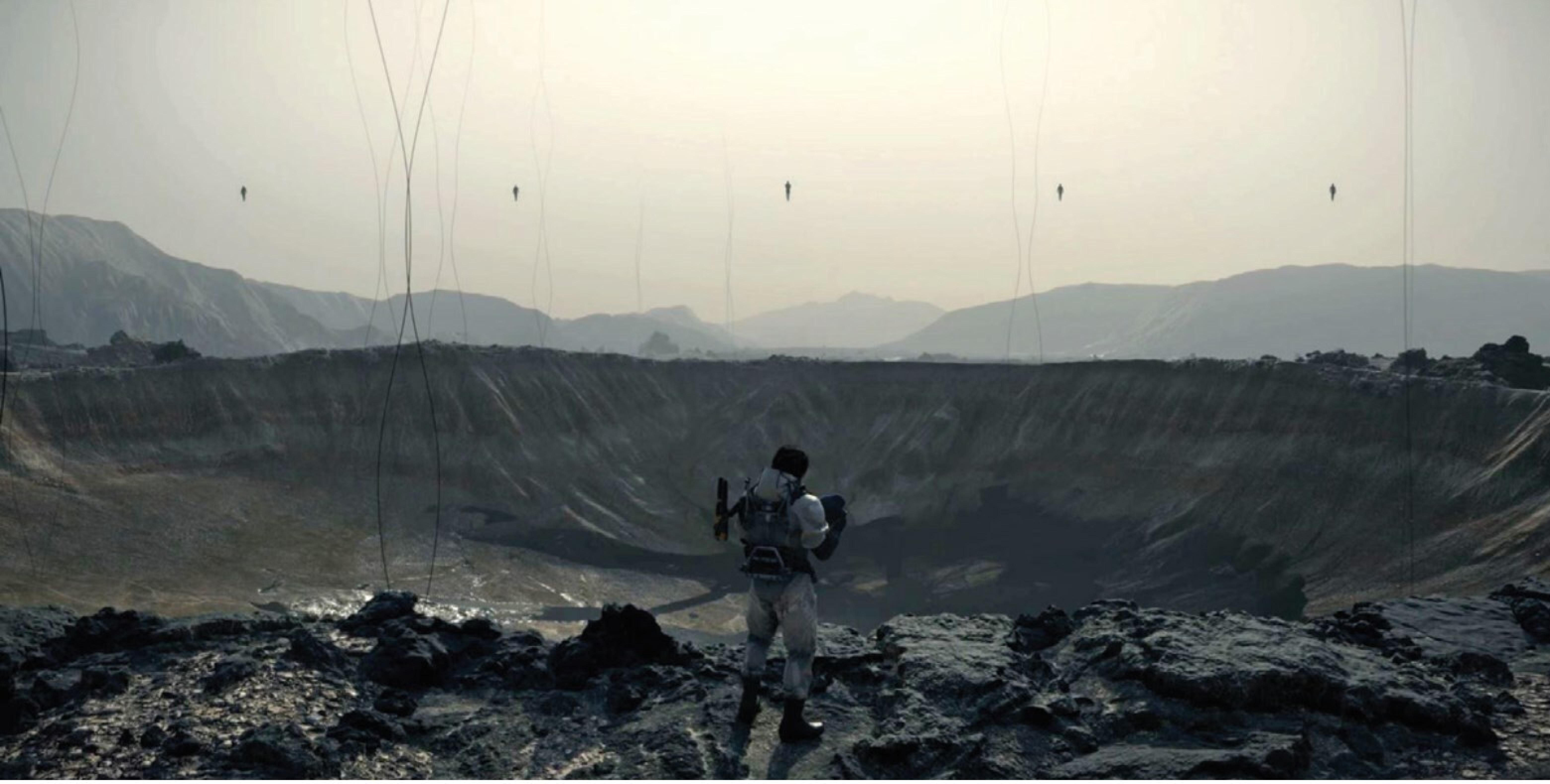
It wouldn't be Dauntless without the massive behemoths, and one new addition to the lineup is an incredibly deadly insect known as Kharabak. I went up against this deadly foe with some veteran allies, and he absolutely destroyed us. This fearsome flying wasp-like terror can stealth, stack speed increases, and even spread swarms of locust-like bugs onto players, giving them a debuff that interrupts attacks.

Even worse, the bug-plague can spread from player to player when they are near each other, allowing it to quickly propagate within your ranks. You can swing your weapon to knock the bugs off your friends, adding an interesting dynamic to the fight that forces players to work together. Kharabak's windows of opportunity are minimal, but I'm certain his bug bits can be cobbled together to craft some amazing weapons and armor.

Dauntless has a way to go until final release, but the new weapons, beasts, and customization options go a long way toward inspiring confidence in the final product. I can't wait to get dunked on by Kharabak again.
» Daniel Tack



This behemoth can summon a rocky tornado, so be ready to dodge at all times!



Death Stranding

More pieces of a strange puzzle

It's been a year and a half since we first saw Death Stranding, the first game from the newly independent Kojima Productions. Since then, two trailers have offered tantalizing, but scattershot details on how Hideo Kojima's surreal vision starring Norman Reedus and Mads Mikkelsen will actually play. Even after watching the latest eight-minute trailer, we still don't know much about the game, but the new pieces allow us to speculate and understand more of the potential plot.

The trailer begins with Reedus' character, Sam, talking about the Big Bang as "the first explosion," then waking up in an unknown location (though this time, he's fully clothed). We gain a bit of insight into the world of Death Stranding, as Sam is wearing what looks like a Hazmat suit belonging to a company or faction called Porter. Bridges, the other company at play (whose pin Guillermo Del Toro's character wore on his suit jacket in a previous trailer), seems to take heavy losses as a mysterious figure upends the team's plans and eventually submerges several of its personnel, along with Sam, beneath water.

The mysterious black liquid and invisible handprints from previous trailers make a return and are joined by a strange force which seems to accelerate the aging of anyone who breathes too closely near it. Whether it's a noxious gas or the monsters that show up later, we're not sure.

We also gain more insight into the game's antagonists. After the trailer premiered, Kojima, nudged fans on Twitter to rewatch the previous two trailers for clues to connect with this new trailer. In watching those, we see a few throughlines. First, a mysterious figure who appears atop an overturned vehicle performs many of the same hand motions Mikkelsen's character performed in the second trailer, shushing the opposition and pointing in a militaristic manner. It's likely he and Mikkelson's character are one in the same, further cementing him as a sort of puppeteer behind all the reanimated soldiers we've seen.

Since Mikkelson's character seems intertwined with the black goo and noxious force, dead bodies may be more useful to him than live ones; at one point, one of the characters accompanying Sam is lifted into the air, after which he quickly begins to stab himself multiple times. Whether he does this to prevent himself from being captured, or if this a result of being possessed by Mikkelson's character, is unclear.

Kojima dangles a few other mysteries in front of us; who is the baby who seems to magically teleport across this world, ending up inside Sam at some point? The baby makes a hand motion similar to Mikkelson's character – could they be related? Who are the shadowy figures that follow Sam around in the new trailer? Who are the five shadows that appear suspended in midair? What is the "next explosion" Sam mentions at the end of the trailer?

Without much of a concrete plot or gameplay details, we can only speculate. Kojima has always loved keeping fans on their toes, and without knowledge to glean from previous games (as was the case with all the cryptic Metal Gear Solid trailers of years past), fans are more in the dark than ever. Hopefully, the master plan this is all working toward delivers whenever Kojima Productions finally unleashes it. » **Suriel Vazquez**

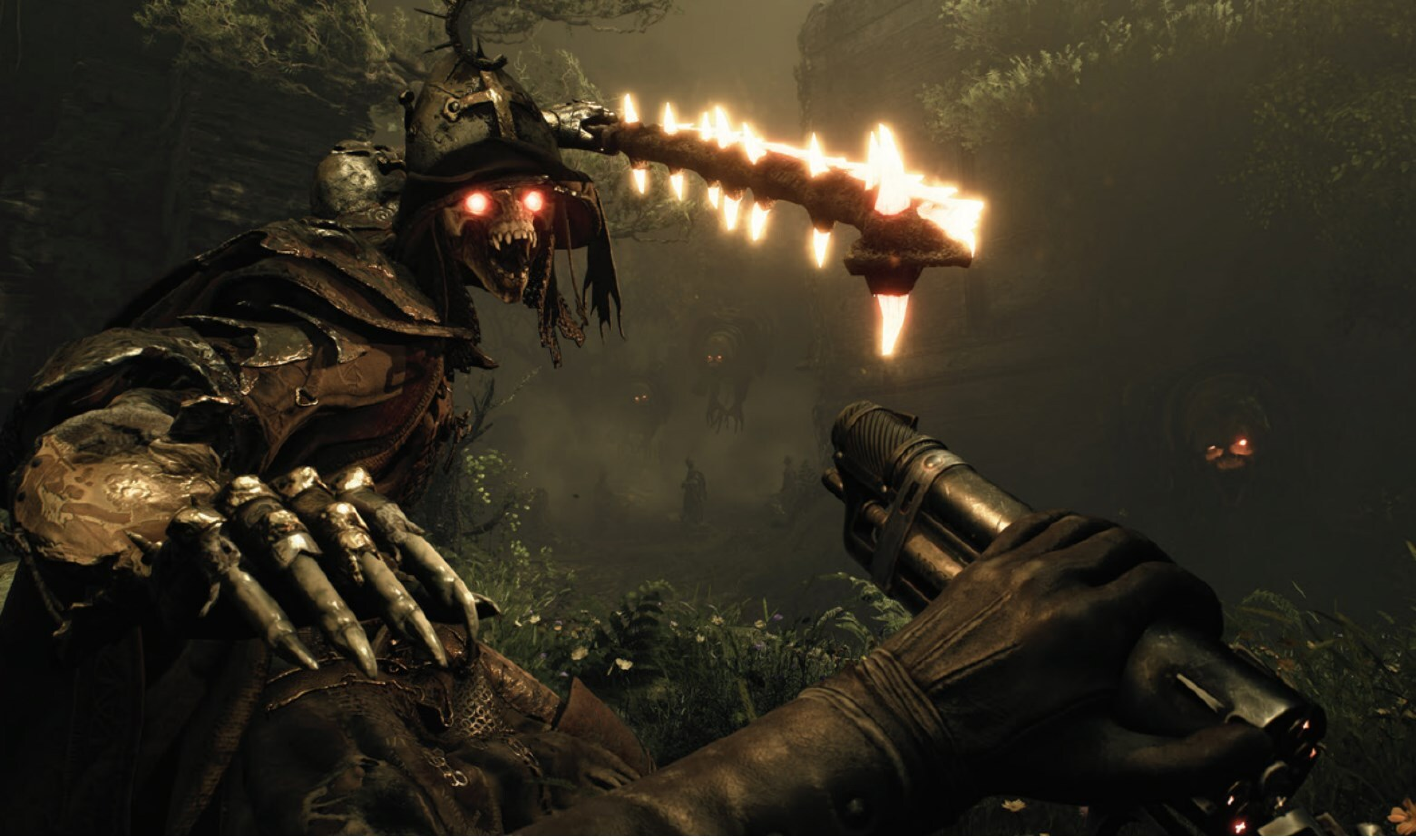
» Platform
PS4

» Style
1-Player Action
(Online TBA)

» Publisher
Sony Interactive
Entertainment

» Developer
Kojima Productions

» Release
TBA



Witchfire

A return to form

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
1-Player Shooter
(Online TBA)

» **Publisher**
The Astronauts

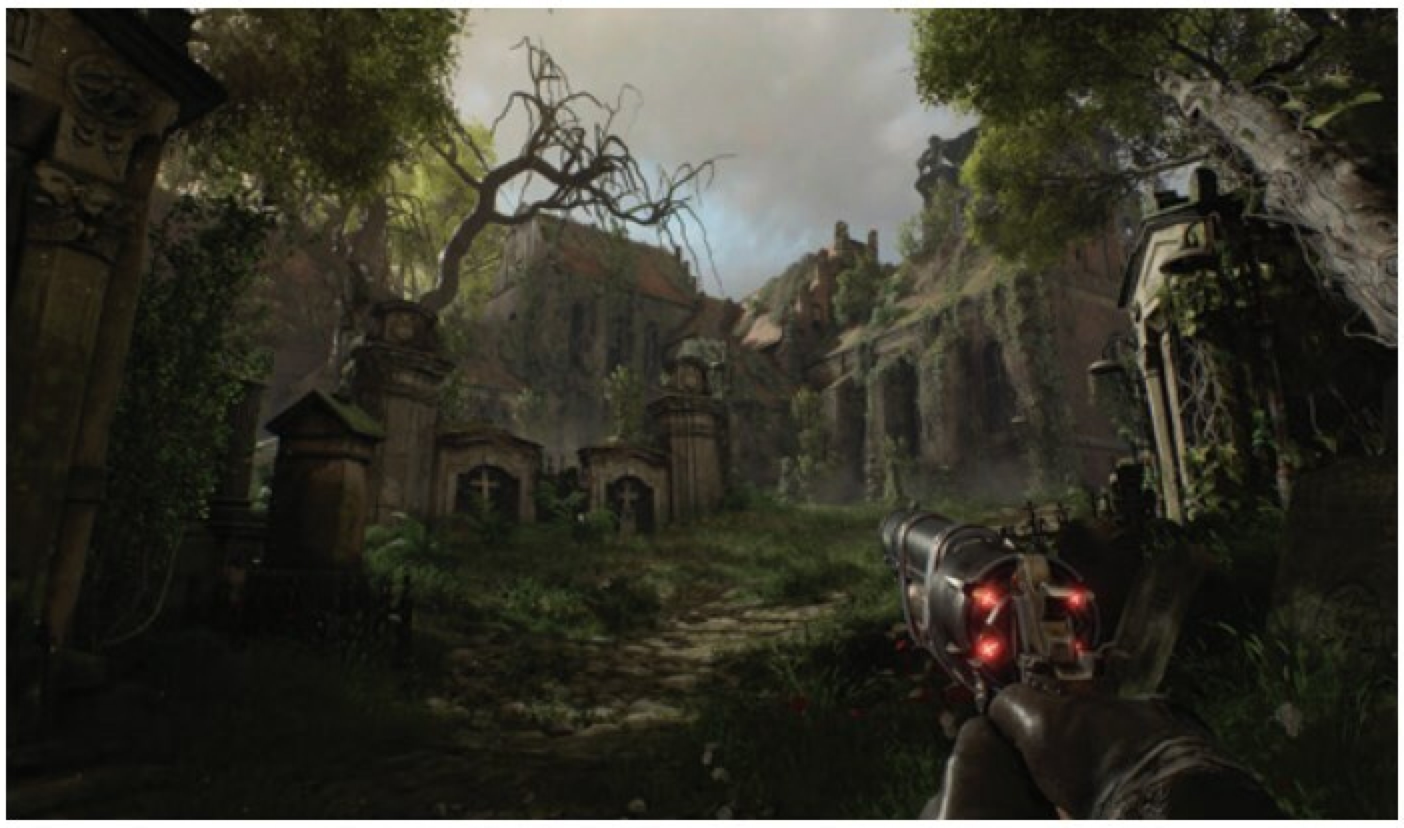
» **Developer**
The Astronauts

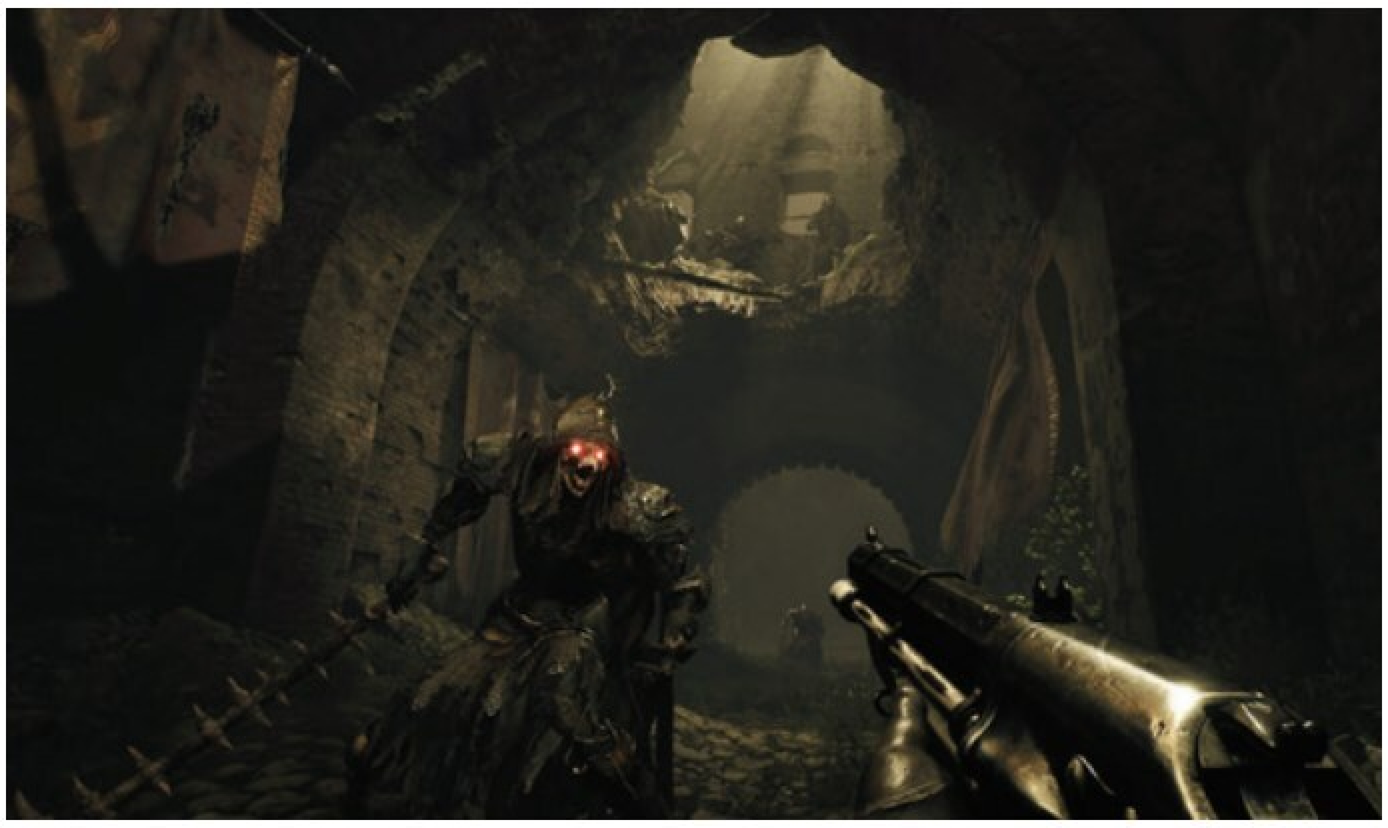
» **Release**
TBA

Before The Astronauts turned heads for the moving and spooky indie adventure The Vanishing of Ethan Carter, the company's cofounders were the creative leads behind the frenzied first-person shooters Painkiller and Bulletstorm. During The Video Game Awards, The Astronauts unveiled its latest project, which opened with a walking simulator-like tease of someone moving through what appeared to be an enchanted forest before giving way to chaotic, first-person shooter action against sword-wielding skeletons and monsters.

The Astronauts is keeping mum on what Witchfire is about, when it's coming out, or even the platforms it's launching on outside of PC. Studio founder Adrian Chmielarz says the game is "nowhere near complete" but added that it was being made in Unreal Engine 4. From what we saw of the game during the trailer, the visuals are stunning, with beautiful, fantastical environments that wouldn't look out of place in a Dark Souls game. In addition, it showcased impressive particle effects as shotguns and flare pistols blew enemies into motes of light.

Despite having few details about what Witchfire is outside of its genre and aesthetic, we want to see more of what The Astronauts has up its sleeve. Painkiller and Bulletstorm were strong fantastical first-person shooters with some superb over-the-top action antics, and it'll be interesting to see how they combine that with the beautiful technology and art design that defined The Vanishing of Ethan Carter. By all accounts, this first-person shooter is far off in the distance, but we eagerly await more details as they come in over the next year. » **Javy Gwaltney**





Valkyria Chronicles 4

Going back to war

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One • Switch

» Style
1-Player Strategy/
Role-Playing

» Publisher
Sega

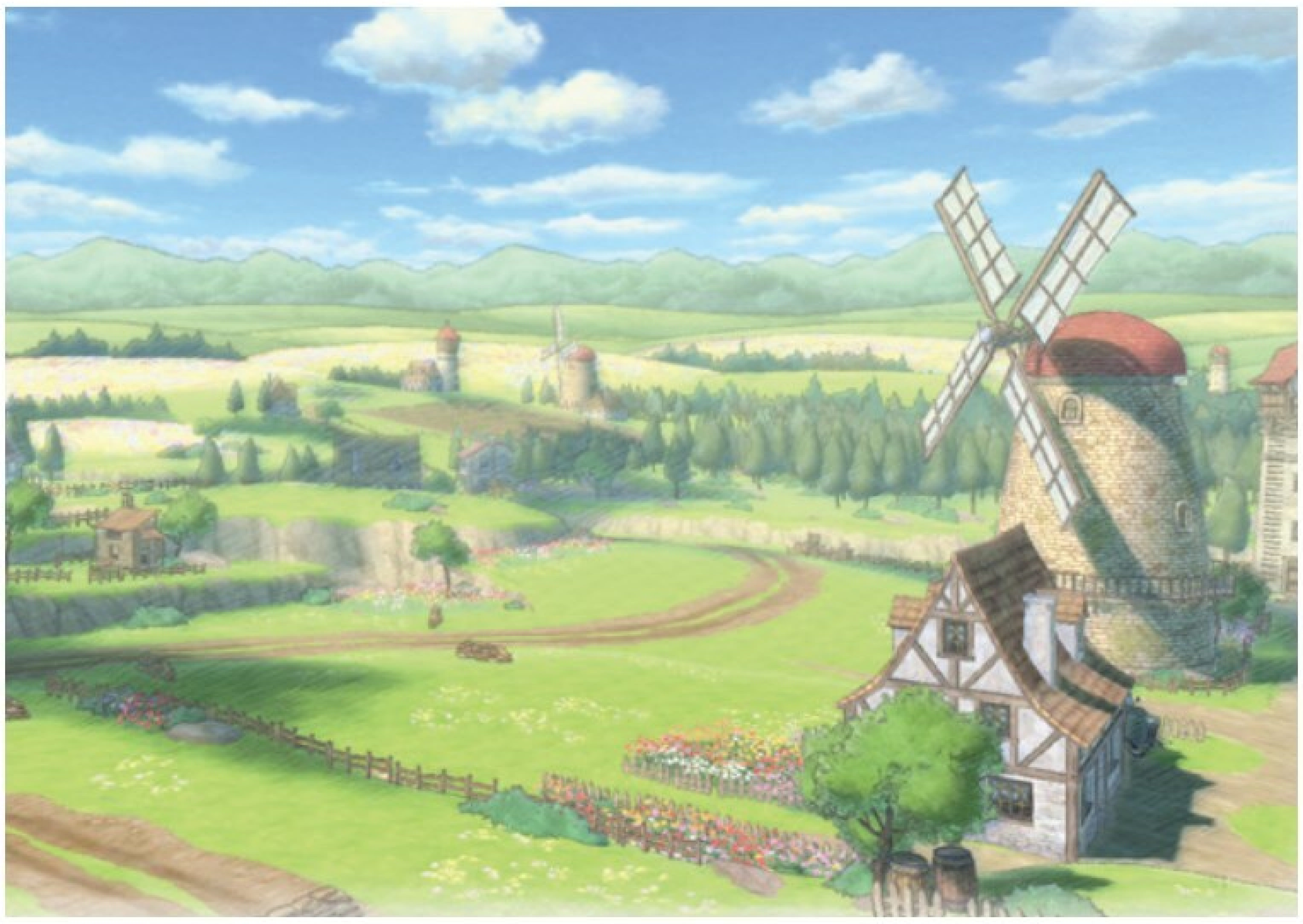
» Developer
Sega

» Release
2018

The original Valkyria Chronicles is a beloved strategy/RPG, but the series has taken a bizarre path since its PS3 debut in 2008. Two PSP sequels (one of which never released in North America) diminished the scale of the battles, and this year's Valkyria Revolution is a spin-off best left forgotten. With each passing year, Valkyria Chronicles seemed less likely to return to the sensibilities that made the first game a cult hit – and then Sega announced Valkyria Chronicles 4.

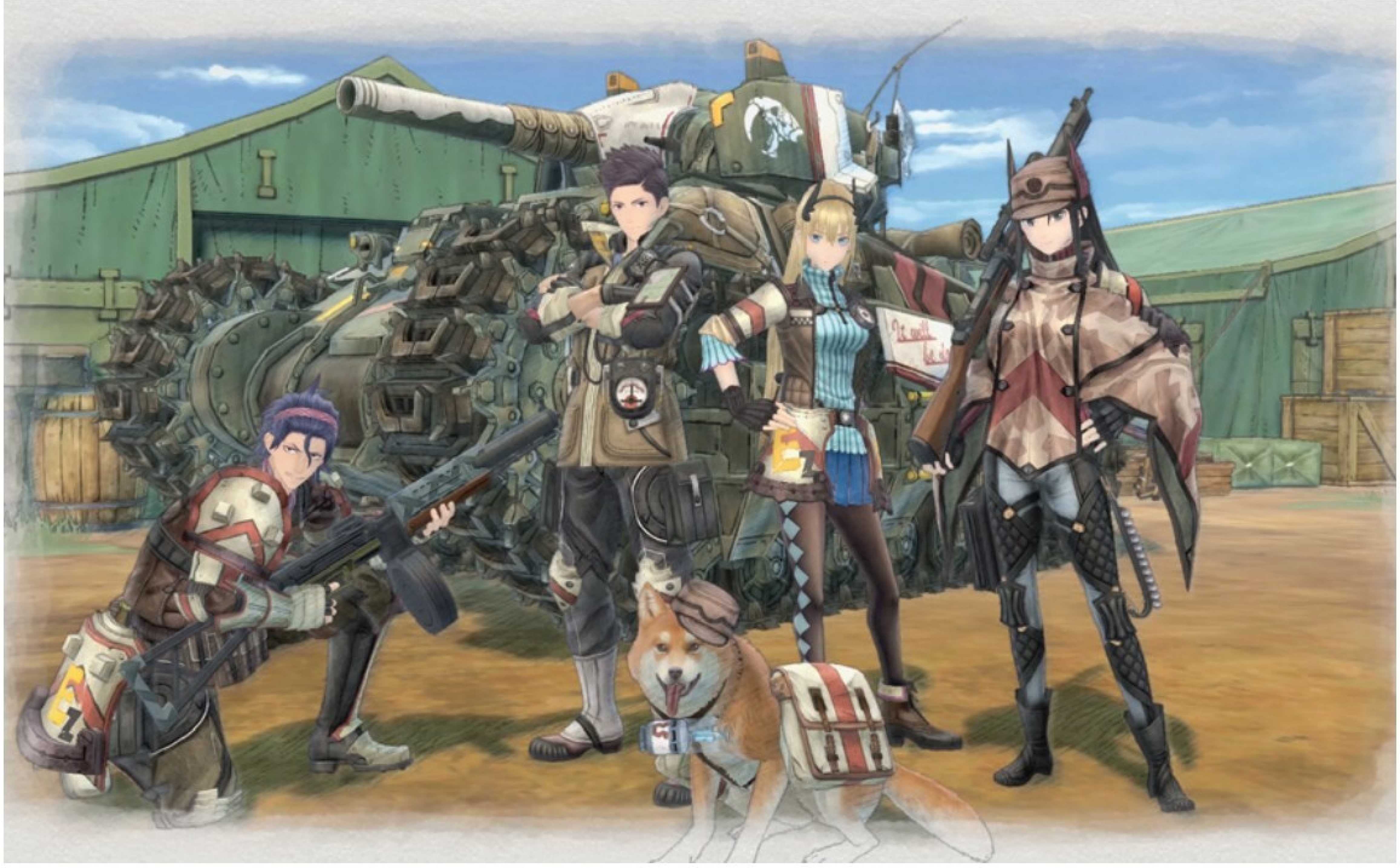
With its return to a gorgeous, hand-drawn aesthetic and an emphasis on tactical battles, Valkyria Chronicles 4 appears to be the game fans have been waiting for. However, if you are new to the series, the all-new characters and storyline mean you should have no trouble joining the battle.

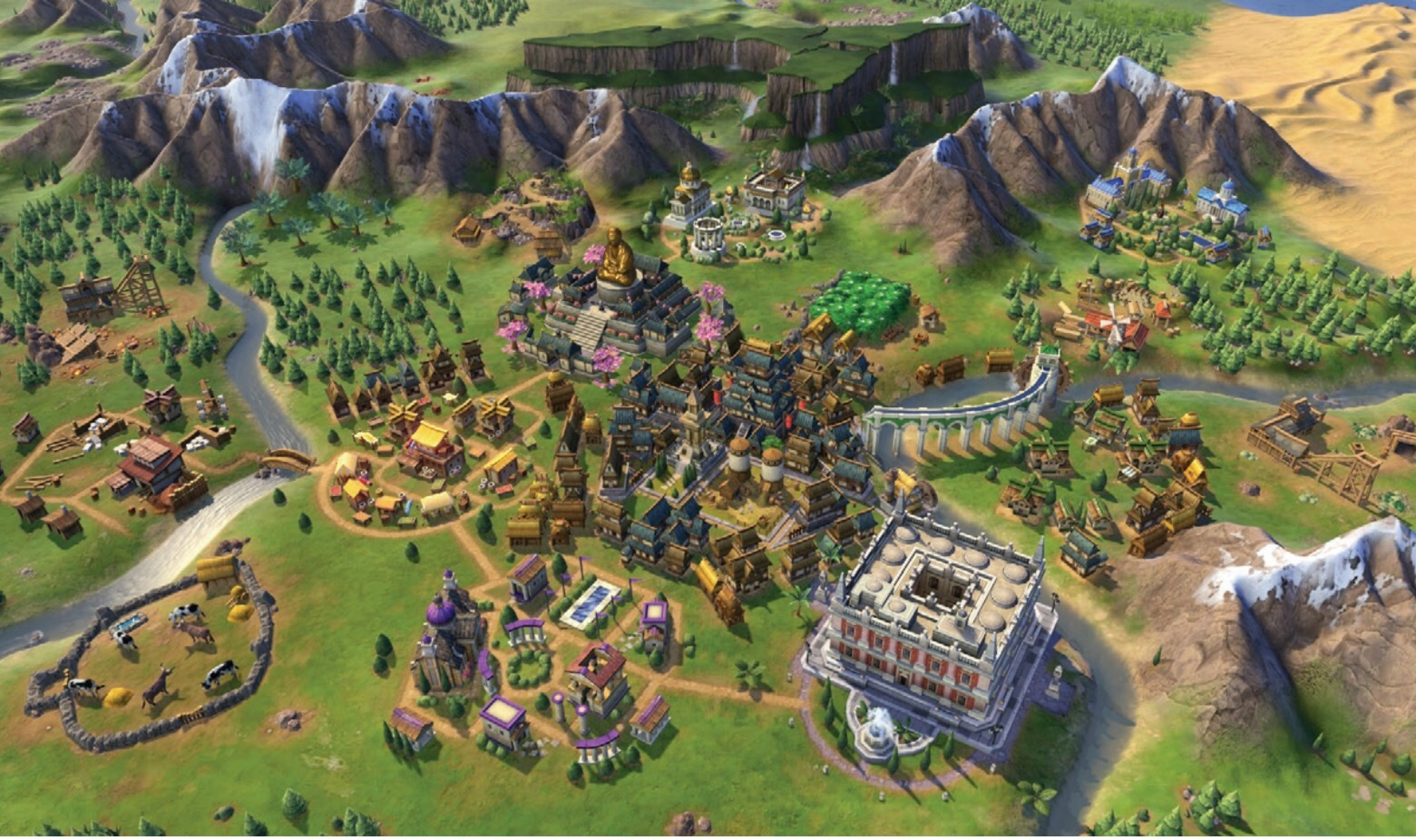
This new installment takes place during the same timeframe as the first Valkyria Chronicles, but on a different front of the Second Europan War. To complete a risky operation aimed at capturing the imperial capital, commander Claude Wallace takes charge of Squad E, a group composed of childhood friends. Sega says it wants to veer away from the archetypical character portrayals of recent entries, focusing instead on making Squad E feel like real people with more relatable struggles. To that end, the team has been studying records of real World War II soldiers to learn how they held onto hope in seemingly impossible situations.



The narrative development of Squad E is just part of the experience. Many of their struggles happen on the battlefield, and Valkyria Chronicles 4 is expanding that facet of gameplay in exciting ways. It has larger maps than previous entries, and lets you deploy more troops into the fray. The blend of turn-based strategy and real-time movement is back, allowing players to plan maneuvers on an overhead map before zooming down to a third-person view of the action. Classes like engineer and sniper keep familiar tactics in play, but a new grenadier class promises to add an explosive twist. Other new features like battleship support and a last stand for defeated units should also create interesting strategic opportunities.

Valkyria Chronicles 4 seems to be a return to the series' roots in many important ways, but it also aims to expand the scope and tactical possibilities of combat. Only time will tell if that approach can win back lapsed fans while bringing in a new audience, but considering it hits all major home consoles in 2018, this series has a good shot at becoming more than an under-the-radar gem. » **Joe Juba**





Civilization VI: Rise And Fall

Changing all the rules

» Platform
PC • Mac

» Style
1-Player Strategy
(12-Player Online)

» Publisher
2K Games

» Developer
Firaxis Games

» Release
February 8

Civilization titles are known for having strong showings on release, but expansions offer the refinement and renovation that set them up for longevity after players have mastered build orders and routes to victory. Rise and Fall looks to be what we've come to expect in this vein, a huge infusion of new mechanics and features to inspire marathon game sessions for years to come.

The most impactful of the new systems is the concept of ages. As you move through the eras of history, you acquire points for accomplishing various things, such as exploring the globe, being the first to obtain significant technology, leading the world in terms of population, and other historical feats. These feats are tallied up and measured as each era dawns, sending your civilization into one of several ages.

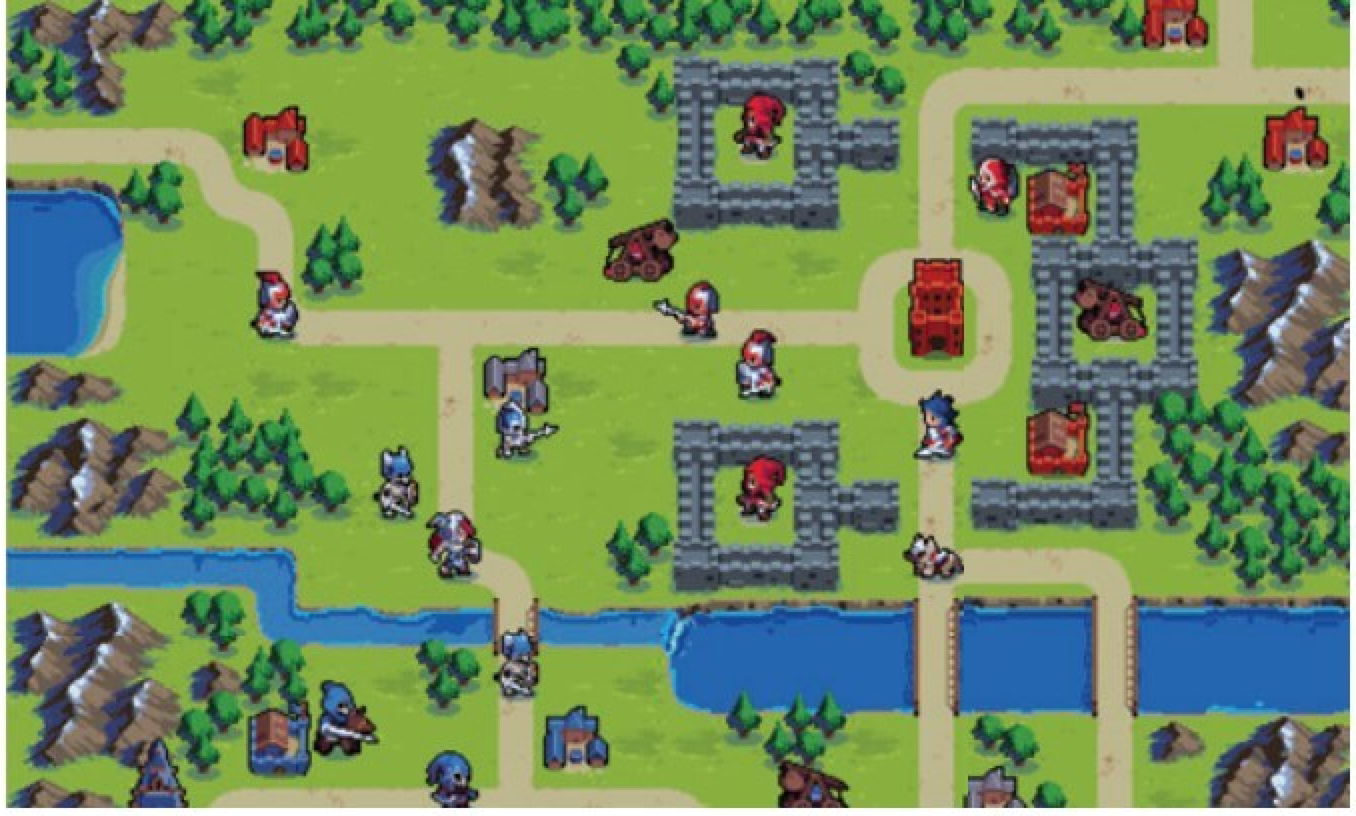
Depending on your performance during each stage of history, your civilization enters a Golden, neutral, or Dark Age. You're on top of the world during a Golden Age, with significant bonuses and cheery citizens, but this might also paint a target on your back for other nations who aren't riding so high. A Dark Age puts you on the defensive, placing some penalties on your populace that make them less effective and easier for rivals to sway. However, all is not lost – if you're able to turn a Dark Age around through some crafty strategic play and smart decisions, you can trigger a Heroic age, which gives incredible bonuses and unique benefits to bring your nation back to the top of the pecking order.

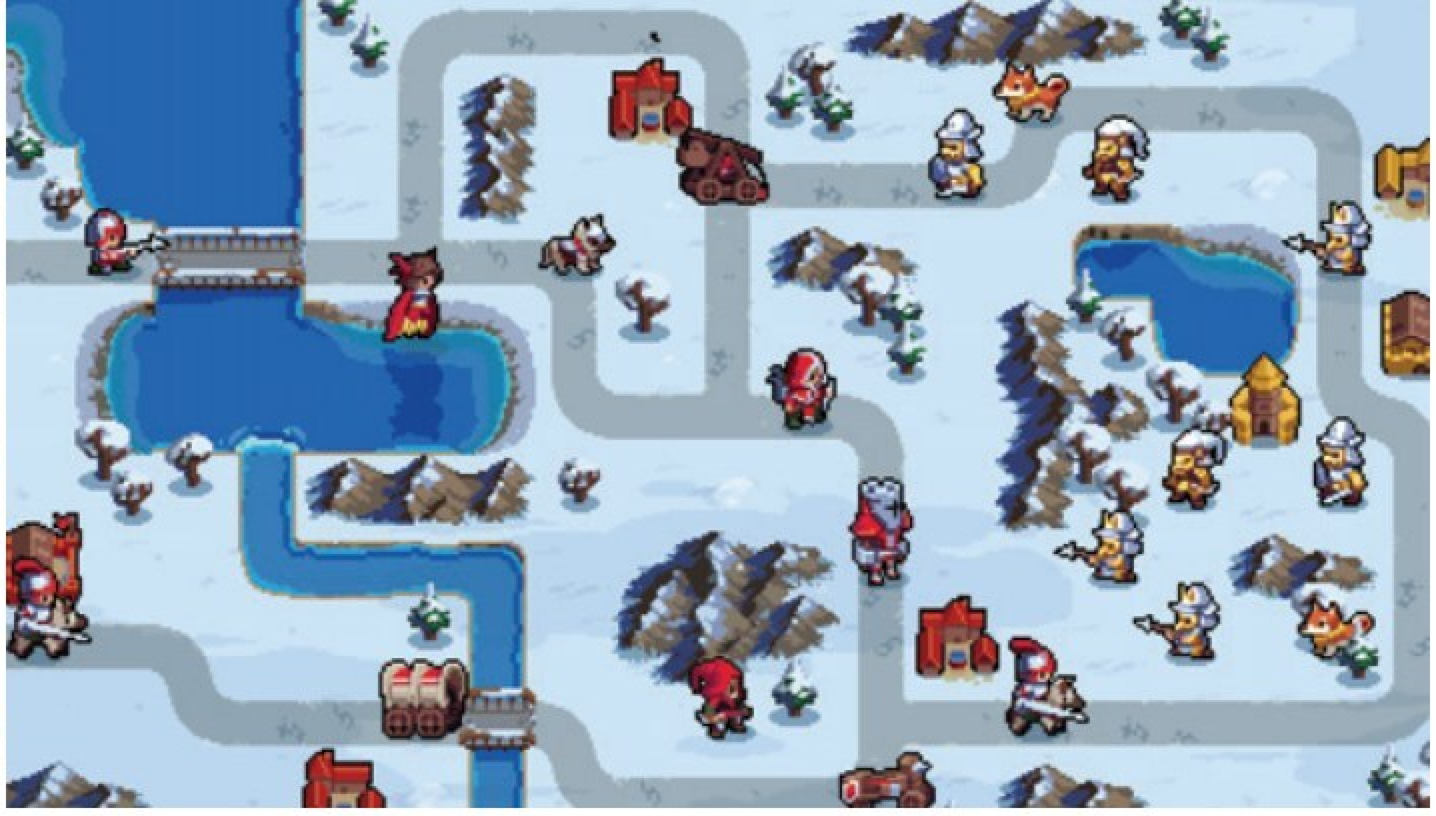
These ages tie into the new loyalty mechanic significantly. Whittle a city's loyalty down and you can take it over without any military might at all. They'll simply choose to break off from their parent nation or join you outright, if you exert the proper influence. Governors can be recruited across your civilization, and you can choose to spread out your leaders to target multiple specializations like finance or military might, or dump all your eggs into a single basket and create one ultra-powerful political pundit.

Emergencies can trigger when a civilization is running away with victory or about to do something significant on the world stage, like setting up a nuclear launch. These alert the world, and offer motivation for nations to rally up and target the big dog. Weighing your options here for an impromptu alliance to shut down an event is critical. Should you try and fail, the nation in question gains additional power, putting them even closer to victory.

Civilization VI is already an awesome addition to the 4X ranks, and Rise and Fall is set to deliver a shakeup with radical changes. I'm looking forward to bringing my nation into a Heroic Age when it lands in February.
» **Daniel Tack**

Eight new civilizations and nine new leaders are available





Wargroove

Colorful warfare

In late 2013, London-based studio Chucklefish made waves with Starbound, an Early Access sci-fi take on Minecraft and Terraria's hook of exploration and construction. Chucklefish has since expanded its catalog, publishing the cute farming sim Stardew Valley to great success, and is now developing its own tactical strategy game called Wargroove.

With a colorful isometric map and tactical gameplay, this indie should grab the attention of those who have spent years clamoring for another Advance Wars. However, Chucklefish is quick to reassure us that Wargroove is its own game. "We've tried to capture the essence of what made games like Advance Wars and Fire Emblem so fun and accessible," Wargroove developer Luciana Nascimento says, "while putting more of a modern twist on it, like online multiplayer, moddability, and built-in map and campaign editors."

The commander units you control, ostensibly your tactician/hero units, have helpful special abilities they can use referred to as their "groove," hence the title of the game. Along with the robust multiplayer mode that Chucklfish is aiming for, the developer also wants to create plentiful single-player content, with a main story mode composed of a few dozen missions and a substantial arcade mode.

With no clear release date in sight, strategy fans will have to be content with waiting for the game to arrive sometime in 2018. Chucklefish's colorful aesthetic and blend of tactical strategy is ambitious, and it looks like the developer is doing a stellar job so far of paying tribute to its influences while also striving to make sure that Wargroove can stand on its own battle-hardened legs.» **Javy Gwaltney**

» Platform
PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Style
1 to 4-Player Strategy

» Publisher
Chucklefish

» Developer
Chucklefish

» Release
2018

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Guacamelee 2

A sequel to a unique genre-blending adventure

» **Platform**
PS4

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Platforming

» **Publisher**
Drinkbox Studios

» **Developer**
Drinkbox Studios

» **Release**
2018

The sequel to 2013's action platformer Guacamelee was announced at Paris Games Week, surprising and delighting fans who remembered the original's bright art style, excellent combat, and Metroid-esque structure. Guacamelee 2 ups the ante of the first game by taking its qualities and amplifying them with new challenges and abilities.

As a direct sequel, Guacamelee 2 brings back hero Juan for another adventure against a new cadre of villainous supernatural forces. After Juan defeated the evil skeleton Carlos Calaca in the first game, he brought his love back from the land of the dead. Now another force threatens the world of the living and he is called to duty once again.

Up to four players can now participate in the journey, each with a distinct color to help differentiate the luchadores when things get chaotic. Once one player hits the end of a room, the other players automatically get teleported to the end as well, ensuring that novices won't get left behind or hold back more experienced players.

Combat should seem instantly familiar to fans and retains its character-action roots. Defeating enemies involves overwhelming them with flurries of punches and throws. Most of the abilities you get throughout the game are not only used for traversal and breaking into new areas, but also for strong attacks.

The returning chicken transformation allows Juan to crawl through small spaces, but it is now a viable method to take into enemy encounters. The chicken form has unique moves and acts as a smaller target, and a Mega Chicken transformation facilitates pollo-powered destruction as the monster bird stomps helpless and hapless enemies into the ground.

Guacamelee is also known for its timing-perfect platforming challenges, which the sequel does not shy away from. In my demo, I see small hooks placed against the background that shoot me in the direction I jump at them. They essentially function as boost pads in the air and aid you in reaching new heights. Before long, the hooks are placed in more dangerous areas, then disappear and reappear on a timer.

Guacamelee 2 does not reinvent the wheel, but it feels exactly as fun as the first game with more of what it did well. If Drinkbox Studios brings back everything that was great about its predecessor while also building on new ideas, it will no doubt reach a new high bar for the developer.
» **Imran Khan**

Riverbond

Playing blocks together with friends

Sometimes you just need a quick hit of hacking and slashing, which is where Cococucumber's Riverbond comes in. The overhead action game has the makings to be something you and your friends play for hours on end.

Riverbond is a four-player cooperative action game, where players venture through bite-sized worlds to complete quests and unlock their doors. The experience is like an espresso-shot version of a side quest, giving the players a varying objective and just sending them off to take care of it and leave.

Kill all the enemies, wreck the fort, save all the hostages, or collect all the doodads – your goal is to get in and out until you complete the world and fight the boss. It behooves you to come prepared, because your sword swings as fast as you can press the button and the enemies feel never ending.

The entire world of Riverbond is made up of voxels, small little blocks that build structures and characters, making almost everything in the game destructible. If some enemies are on a floor above you in their wooden fort, you simply slash at the foundations and bring the whole thing crashing down in a voxel explosion.

So far, Riverbond looks like an ephemeral experience that you keep coming back to. » **Imran Khan**

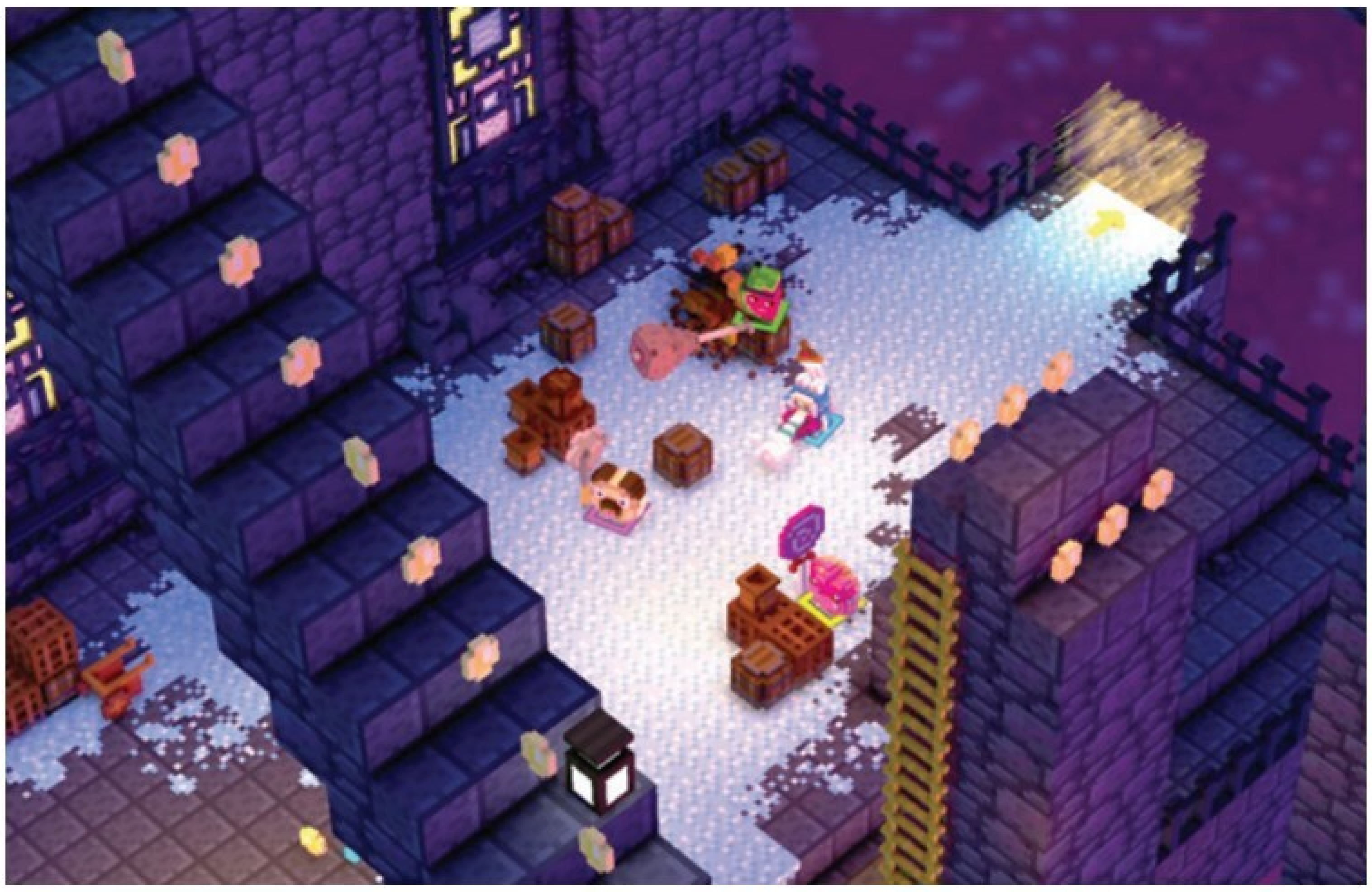
» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

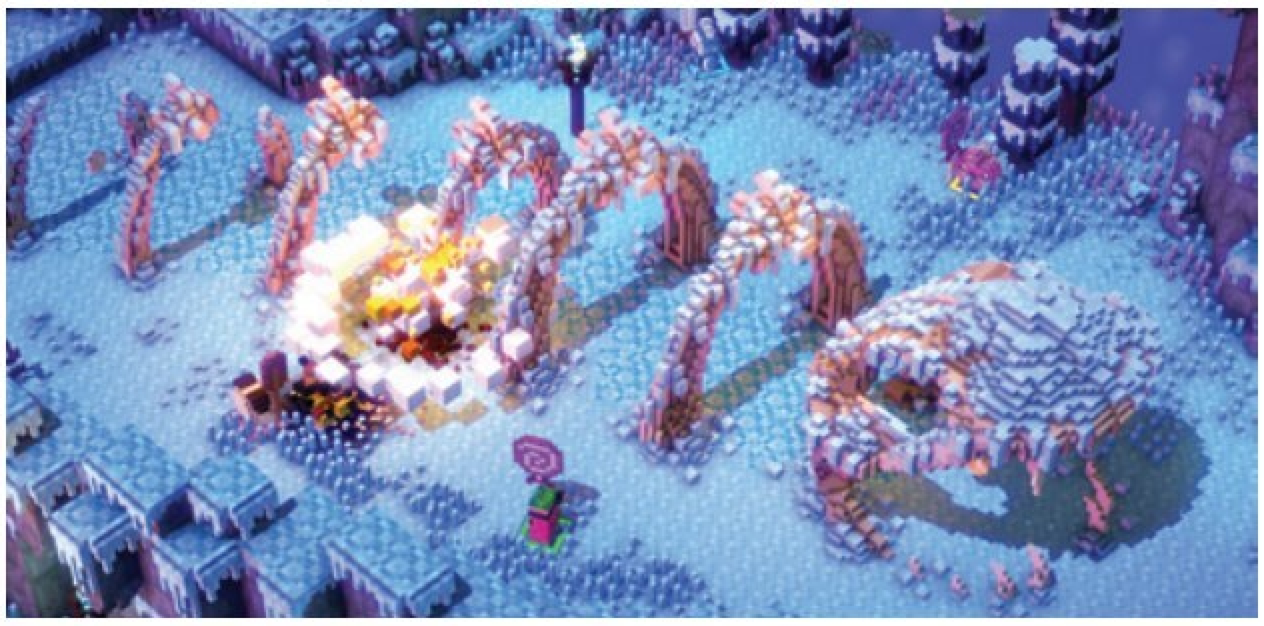
» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Cococucumber

» **Developer**
Cococucumber

» **Release**
2018





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Student work by: John Rogeles & George Stoll

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

92 PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds

Drop out of a plane and experience an epic battle royale with 99 other players. Whether it's at the hands of a wild-jumping hammer punch or down the sights of an 8x scope under the cover of rain, death comes to all but one player or team. When you die, no problem, you can be back into another grand melee in moments. The battlegrounds play out differently every game, and that keeps you coming back again and again for the sweet taste of victory and equally epic defeats.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	Ajit Pai.

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

For more information on the age classification ratings in our reviews, head to gameinformer.com/ratings

Destiny 2: Curse Of Osiris

A precarious balancing act

Style Online Multiplayer Shooter **Publisher** Activision **Developer** Bungie **Release** December 5 **Rating** T

7.25

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Track down the elusive exiled Warlock named Osiris, who has been lost in the "forests" of Mercury

» Graphics
A highlight of this expansion, the art design and backdrops are some of the best the Destiny franchise has offered to date

» Sound
Another remarkable score from the Bungie music team, this time utilizing leitmotif to signal the presence and influence of the titular character

» Playability
Destiny 2's gunplay and control remain the industry standard

» Entertainment
The storytelling lacks punch, the new play spaces aren't used to their full potential, and the endgame loop still has problems, but Curse of Osiris has more under the hood than first appears

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Bungie faces the unenviable task of balancing established plans for content roll-out and simultaneously responding on the fly to an anxious and vocal community, many of whom have valid and frustrated feelings about this sequel's problems in the endgame. Curse of Osiris is colored by that debate. This first expansion is a flawed and in-progress attempt to serve the game's multiple masters – both casual and hardcore enthusiasts. Viewed on its own merits, I found a lot to enjoy, even if the core story, missions, and new setting elements don't live up to their potential. At the same time, the release coincides with a few important updates that encourage deeper commitment.

Long hinted at in the series' fiction, the curtain is finally pulled back on the mighty warlock Osiris. Framed as the fantasy fable of the grand wizard lost in the mystical woods, the narrative framework has a lot of potential, especially with the addition of the reality and time-experimenting Vex enemies at center stage. Unfortunately, despite a few attractive cinematic moments, the story fails to reach full stride. I never got invested in the conflict or its MacGuffin villain.

Mercury is a breathtaking new artistic backdrop, dominated by imposing architecture and the dazzling bloom of sunlight. The gates that lead into simulations of different timelines make for the sort of rich sci-fi concepting Destiny 2 should embrace. Yet again, the idea doesn't live up to what it could be. The patrol space is too compact to compel a sense of exploration, and the connected network of gateways doesn't capitalize on the breadth of locales and situations suggested by the conceit. The semi-random and interlinked puzzle-piece nodes of the simulated Vex Infinite Forest fail to differentiate the individual missions from one another. Likewise, the story missions that flow through both Mercury and other destinations offer few surprises or memorable action sequences.

Crucible play maintains the focus on teamwork and deliberate pacing that was present at launch months ago. I was disappointed to not see any new playlists or game modes, as PvP needs to be refreshed, notwithstanding some important and welcome balance tweaks that help even the playing field between weapons and classes. The limited playlist options harm replayability, and something needs to happen to inject increased variety into moment-to-moment play. Thankfully, several excellent PvP maps lend freshness. From the dimly lit halls of Titan's arcology to the shimmering cliffs of Mercury's distant past, these are thoughtfully constructed battlefields with Bungie's usual practiced eye for chokepoints and lines of scrimmage.

The new Eater of Worlds raid lair reuses some environment features from Destiny 2's first raid, but don't be fooled. This six-person cooperative expedition may be shorter than previous raids, but it boasts a few great encounters and an awesome boss fight. The puzzles are intriguing and logical without being obtuse, and the action scenes are intense and gratifying. Raid loot continues to need work, lacking the breadth of rewards and exciting drops that characterized the first Destiny raids.

Several new additions offer an olive branch to players struggling to find meaningful long-term investment. New masterwork weapons provide a fun chase for randomized perks and the ability to speed up the super recharge rate through more orb creation, but without breaking the game's balance. A separate weapon forging mechanic demands an enjoyable grind for resources, and increased reason to engage with excellent activities like strikes and adventures. The new heroic adventures, with their challenging modifiers and fierce enemy combatants, make for great cooperative fun, and I hope they soon expand into other locales beyond Mercury. The frustrations of randomness in the token economy are also partially addressed, with a smart system to afford players who have already invested in a lengthy grind the option to purchase missing set pieces from some vendors. As a collector, it's one of my personal favorite new features.

I'm dismayed that the crunch of vault, mod, and shader inventory remains unresolved. At times I simply turn the game off because I can't stomach the task of managing more item juggling. In a loot-focused game about progression and collection, it's a significant problem. I'm also increasingly troubled by the prevalence and number of rewards looped in with the microtransaction system. When Destiny 2 is struggling to find meaningful rewards to engage players in day-to-day play, it seems tone deaf to hide ships, ghosts, sparrows, ornaments, and armor sets behind a loot-box system with only the stingiest paths to acquisition through natural cycles of play.

This release doesn't occur in a vacuum. Curse of Osiris launches amid public backlash against certain Destiny 2 systems, including XP throttling and select content being locked behind the expansion purchase. Beyond that criticism, the expansion doesn't hit the high notes it could have reached. Even if some features, characters, and new locations deserve more depth, this first DLC pack hides some thoughtful renovations and new opportunities for adventure behind an underwhelming first few hours. The robust community has a lot to say about the game, and I share some of the concerns being voiced. Simultaneously, my frustrations are tempered by several fun activities and loot chases that continue to keep me engaged. **» Matt Miller**

Heroic adventures offer a hefty dose of challenge to high-level players

Life Is Strange: Before The Storm – Hell Is Empty

A gripping and satisfying finale

8.5

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Uncover more of Rachel Amber's family secrets as you build your relationship with her

» Graphics
Reused environments and stilted character animations still leave much to be desired

» Sound
The stellar soundtrack helps set the mood for scenes, while the voice acting enhances the emotionally charged moments

» Playability
Outside of some minor hiccups, Before the Storm remains easy to pick up and play, and the choices continue to matter

» Entertainment
Chloe and Rachel's complicated friendship shines in this finale, making you care about each character and the bond they share in a way you couldn't fully grasp in the original series

» Replay Value
Moderate

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Square Enix **Developer** Deck Nine **Release** December 19 **Rating** M

From grief to mental illness, Life is Strange has always made hardship the core of its experience. The finale of this prequel stays true to that notion, but it also brings a sense of satisfaction and a somber reminder of the original's impact. Deck Nine has done a wonderful job at calling back to the first game while also making you feel like you have agency over how Chloe evolves as her relationship with Rachel grows. The result is a roller coaster of a finale that's both touching and tragic, raising questions about what it means to be a good friend. The answers will be different for everyone, which is what makes this story matter – not only for what it adds to the Life is Strange canon, but also for what it reveals about its players.

Hell is Empty picks up where the last episode left off, showing the aftermath of the drama-filled Amber family dinner. Rachel gets some long-awaited answers about her father's past, while Chloe tries to be supportive. This episode is full of intensity, but the best parts are the tender moments between Chloe and Rachel, where you see how much this fast friendship has changed both of their lives. This finale makes you believe in their bond and root for their success as individuals and as a pair. In the original, we didn't know much about Rachel except for the few instances where Chloe spoke of her. Now I feel like I know and care about Rachel in a way that makes the first game hit even harder. I also feel like I understand Chloe and her motivations better. The writing is authentic and genuine, showing new sides to even minor characters like Nathan Prescott and Frank Bowers. Nothing is black and white, making these multi-dimensional personalities even more intriguing and sympathetic.

My favorite part of Before the Storm is the impact of my choices. I had a lot of agency over where I wanted to take Chloe and Rachel's relationship. Should they become romantically involved? How do they show their appreciation for each other? As you make these decisions, Deck Nine tells a well-authored story that acknowledges the role you play in shaping it. Little things like asking Rachel for her bracelet end up having a nice payoff later on, but the moment still stands on its own. Even things you did in the first episode have impact here, making the time it took to develop relationships worth it. As with the previous game, the finale offers one very big decision in how the end plays out, and this decision really makes you ponder what matters to you. I appreciated how it said something about me as much as it said something about Chloe and Rachel's relationship.

While the episode has plenty of high points, its repeated environments are disappointing; the junkyard wears out its welcome the most, and even new areas are mostly a part of places we've already been. The gameplay is sparse, mainly relying on dialogue options, with a few easy-to-solve puzzles. These mostly entail finding the right item or tool for the occasion. While they aren't anything remarkable, they also don't get in the way of the story that's unfolding either. Backtalk continues to be a way for Chloe to solve her problems, but at least it's toned down a bit from how over-the-top it was in previous episodes. Still, plenty of scenes play out where Chloe disrespects people in a way that feels campy. We know Chloe is rebellious, but these scenes come across as unnatural.

Even with some foibles, Hell is Empty does a fantastic job filling in the blanks of what happened before Chloe was reunited with Max. As a fan, its references to the original shed light on how many things came to be, such as Chloe's transformation. Yes, I knew the conclusion, but it still has enough interesting developments to keep me invested. Before the Storm accomplishes what so many prequels fail to do; it tells its own story that leaves you content, while also connecting to the original game in a meaningful way.

» **Kimberley Wallace**

Steep: Road To The Olympics

A lonely mountain

Style Online Multiplayer Sports **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** Ubisoft Annecy **Release** December 5 **Rating** T

The Winter Olympics and Steep don't have a lot in common other than they take place on snowy mountains, which is the crux of this expansion's problems. Steep's base game and its DLC up to this point are open-ended experiences predicated on letting players explore different extreme sports forms in free spaces. The addition of nine Olympic events and a Become a Legend mode in Road to the Olympics restrict what is best about Steep with little to show for it in return. Even if you're solely interested in the Olympic content, this expansion provides little substance.

The Become a Legend mode is accessible in the main game's Aravis location (showing up as an optional event alongside the others), taking you on a training regimen that culminates in qualifying for and competing in three freestyle events in South Korea – Big Air, Halfpipe, and Slopestyle. This isn't a story mode or a deep career mode with a progression system for upgrading your rider. Instead, it's a series of tutorials and the occasional event. These competitions are routine for those who've already played Steep, and laborious for the uninitiated.

The mode half-heartedly attempts the staging of its own Olympic drama. This includes a narrator chronicling your journey leading up to the Winter Games and video clips of real-life Olympic athletes such as Lindsey Vonn, Sage Kotsenburg, and Kevin Rolland talking about their professional experiences, but it fails to convey much of the Olympic experience itself. It lacks TV-style presentation, an Olympic Village, a sense of occasion through the opening ceremonies, and even medal presentations on a podium.

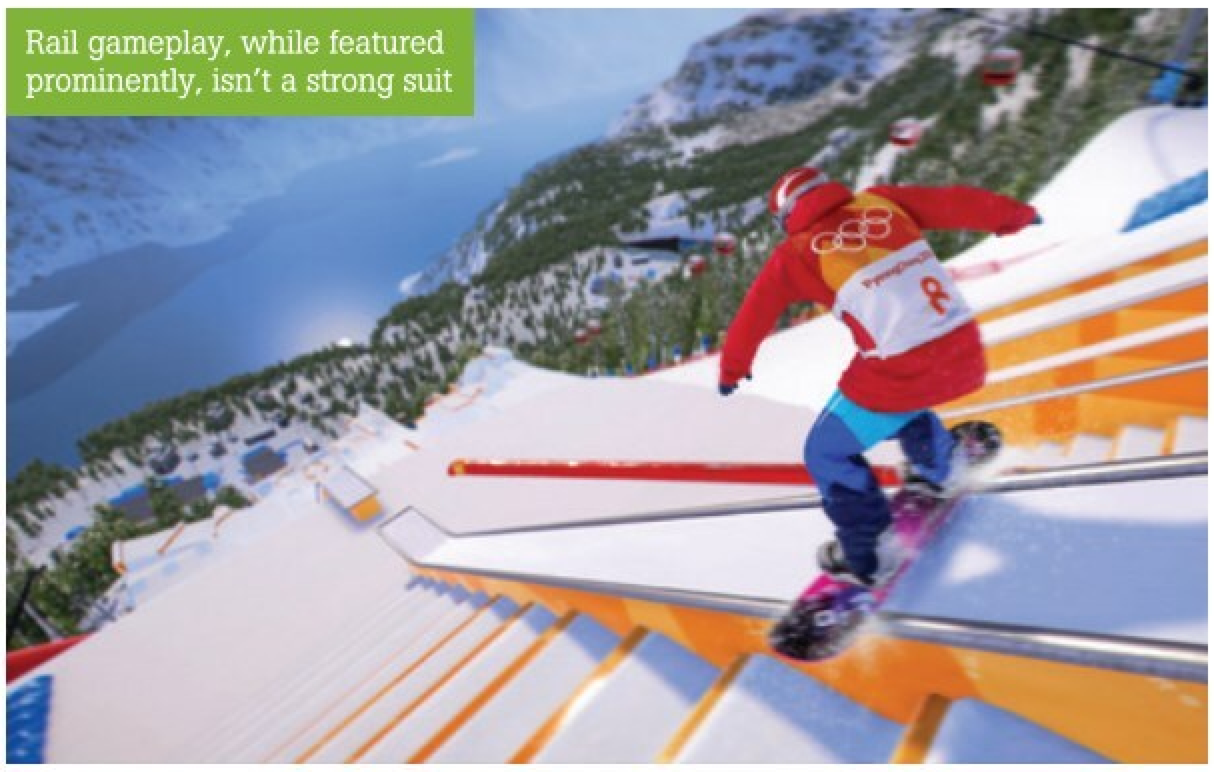
My favorite events of the Winter Games – the skiing – aren't even included in the Become a Legend mode. These are instead only available by themselves on an isolated mountain representing South Korea. You can't even free ride it like all the other mountains in the game. It exists only to host the nine Olympic events, and therefore is a waste of a mountain; it's unrelated to the rest of the game's philosophy, events, and even online features. You can see the online times of others, but there is no meeting and competing with real-life players in South Korea. Some Olympic spirit.

The gameplay doesn't stray far from what Steep already has demonstrated it can do. Thankfully, none of the usual half-baked Olympic gameplay crutches are present, such as minigames, quick-time events, or button mashing – just snowboarding and skiing. The Super-G and Giant Slalom skiing events feel nice, with the fast downhill races offering a new experience for Steep players as skis chatter over the icy slopes with a palpable sense of danger. The Parallel Giant Slalom event on a snowboard was also fun, demanding a quick rhythmic swaying with the right analog for the fastest time through the gates. Despite these highlights, the Olympic content's focus on the actual Slopestyle freestyle course in South Korea emphasizes an existing weakness in Steep's gameplay – rail grinding and sliding. These were added as DLC, and getting on rails still feels unpredictable and too floaty to feel satisfying.

The Road to the Olympics expansion also contains alps in Japan. Thankfully, this new mountain region includes all the drop zones, mountain stories, challenges, and freeride opportunities Steep players have enjoyed in the base game. This region naturally includes the updates to Steep thus far, including the ability to change the world's ambiance and time of day at will, and other extreme sports like the rocket wingsuit. These true-to-form additions are redeeming because they are a more natural fit with the base game than the new Olympic content.

There's more going on in these winter sports than what happens when the world pays attention every four years, and Steep shouldn't be held hostage by the Olympics when what it does is working so well already. This content neither plays to Steep's existing strengths nor gives gamers looking for Olympic competition anything satisfying.

» **Matthew Kato**



Rail gameplay, while featured prominently, isn't a strong suit

6

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Add Olympic content to Steep – somewhat incongruously – both as DLC and as a standalone game that includes the base title

» **Graphics**
The game looks nice, and the new content includes the ability to change the mountains' time of day and ambiance filters at will

» **Sound**
A narrator chronicles your Olympic journey and an announcer calls out your tricks, but the crunch of the snow and howling of the wind are my favorite elements. I would have loved some cowbell during the Alpine events

» **Playability**
The slopestyle trick events rely on rail slides, which is a gameplay weakpoint

» **Entertainment**
The freestyle events play to the title's gameplay core, but the other Olympic events aren't a fundamental part of the experience. The Become a Legend mode is more of a long, drawn-out tutorial than a career mode

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds

Looting, shooting, and staying alive

9.5

PC

» Concept
Be the last player (or team) to survive on an abandoned island packed with supplies, weapons, and vehicles

» Graphics
The action looks crisp if your graphics card can handle it – you may have to settle for less if you want optimal performance

» Sound
Quality sound is essential to the experience, from creeping footsteps to positional shots being fired

» Playability
The simple and addictive concept is accessible for players of all skill levels, and you learn more advanced survival techniques and proficiencies playing match after match

» Entertainment
Playable, watchable, intense, and enjoyable gameplay makes it easy to see how this battle royale phenomenon took off

» Replay Value
High

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH gameinformer GOLD

Style 100-Player Online Shooter **Publisher** Bluehole **Developer** PUBG Corporation **Release** December 20 **Rating** T

This is it, the final circle. Five players are left alive. Swinging around a corner into a tiny abandoned house, I stumble upon a prone assailant. He tags me a few times, putting my health in the red zone, but I am ready for a close-range skirmish and make short work of him, grabbing a wealth of healing items and ammo from his corpse. Outside, the sound of a sniper rifle cracking leaves another dead. The play area is miniscule now, forcing the remaining players into a confined space – the house I'm in and the area directly outside the walls. Is the final player tucked away in the closed bathroom? I shoot the door down but there's no one inside. No movement from the windows. Where could the last mark be? While I scan intently for any signs of movement, I hear the all-too-familiar metallic tink of a grenade landing at my feet. Boom. A number-two placement for me, and Winner Winner, Chicken Dinner for the final foe that peeked around the door to fling in the fatal finisher.

PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds is full of magical moments and stories like this, ranging from teeth-clenching suspense to hilarious mishaps. Creating those tales from game to game keeps you coming back for more. While there are only two maps, this isn't like other shooters where you may find yourself getting tired of the scenery. These maps are huge and full of things to discover hundreds of hours in. Since games play out in a dynamic fashion each time, map variety isn't an issue.

Gameplay is spurred on by a field-of-play that continually gets smaller and smaller, forcing remaining players into the same area and creating conflict, so you don't need to worry about facing 99 campers. Other neat gameplay aspects, like drop crates that contain powerful weapons and armor, create skirmish points along the way. This elegant design keeps the game fast and fun, from the moment you select a drop point to the final kill.

Weapons range from crowbars to machine guns, and you must learn to make the most of whatever you can find. When a game starts, you may be struggling with many other players to slaughter each other over a pistol. Later, as the field is trimmed, a shotgun looks pedestrian against scoped and modded assault weapons. Vehicles provide a fast transportation option perfect for cruising around the map to loot-rich areas, running over players, or screeching through a dangerous position. But you need to weigh the noise aspect – other players can see and hear you coming. The dynamic elements of both weapon and vehicle availability from game to game ensure that every match experience is unique and interesting. Still, there's nothing quite like rolling up with three of your friends and clearing out another team as they try to secure a crate drop.

Solo survival is fun, but teamplay (you can duo with one friend, or group up to four players in a squad) makes PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds shine. Instead of instantly being killed after receiving lethal damage, if you're teamed up you go into a downed state, allowing your friends to pick you back up. This leaves them vulnerable to being gunned down by the same people that presumably shot you, so there's a lot of harrowing strategy involved in limping your way to a safe position where you friends can get to you safely, or experiencing that movie moment where your team struggles to locate the sniper that picked you off (and rather than kill you, leaves you alive as bait).

For all the freedom involved in every session, there are still some glitchy quirks and unoptimized aspects of the game that can appear from time to time, like cars spinning into infinity, crashes, or drops. While these incidents can be hilarious, they can also hit at the worst possible time and cost you a win.

PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds brings the battle royale genre to a smashing mainstream success, packed with memorable moments and action-packed adventures. Solo or with friends, you're in for an intense ride that's different every single time. » **Daniel Tack**

This review pertains to the PC version of PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds. The game is also available on Xbox One as a game preview title

Xenoblade Chronicles 2

Depth and sacrifice

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Monolith Soft **Release** December 1 **Rating** T

Role-playing games can be intimidating, so some developers attempt to overcome that entry barrier by simplifying the genre's core components to create a more accessible game. Xenoblade Chronicles 2 is not one of those games. It embraces its complexity, providing dizzying and impressive depth that few modern RPGs can match. I love that unapologetic approach, but it makes Xenoblade Chronicles 2 feel like a Rube Goldberg contraption designed to make toast or flip a light switch; though entertaining, its elaborate machinery ultimately achieves something mundane.

It has familiar elements fans of the series will recognize (including some explicit connections I won't spoil), but the expansive world of Alrest is welcoming to uninitiated players. The setting and story are propelled by a fascinating central concept: the relationship between blades and drivers. Blades are magical beings – human, animal, and otherwise – born from special crystals, and they are bound to the driver who awakens them. The whole world revolves around this dynamic in various ways, and the story uses it to raise unexpected questions about identity and legacy.

Those pockets are interesting, but the overall narrative is a stock quest full of cookie-cutter characters. You control Rex, an idealistic young driver paired with a blade named Pyra, and they are trying to reach the World Tree at the center of Alrest. Events usually shake out exactly as you expect, but that isn't necessarily bad. Even with only a handful of standout moments, the tale gets the job done and the ending is satisfying.

Alrest itself is more of a draw than the story it contains. Each of the continents is an enormous beast floating in a sea of clouds, a concept Xenoblade fans know well. Towering monsters and gorgeous views make exploring new locations fun, and the main zones have distinct otherworldly vibes. The visual style has changed for this entry, but the fantasy world still feels vibrant and unique. With open-world environments full of possibilities to explore at my disposal, I enjoyed searching for hidden areas and making note of high-level monsters to take down later.

For all the time I spent exploring, I poured just as much (or more) effort in the menus managing my progression. As strange as it sounds, this is where Xenoblade Chronicles 2 shines brightest. A staggering array of systems, points, and unlocks are artfully connected, letting players dig deep into how their characters develop. However, the biggest draw is awakening special new blades, which come with their own unique designs, abilities, and quests. Though I'm not a fan of the loot-box-style method (minus the real-world currency) of getting good blades, I can't deny the thrill of a legendary crystal yielding a bizarre new ally for me to power up. The systems may sound convoluted, but once all of the layers have been introduced, the engaging progression model always gives you a goal to aim for.

Xenoblade Chronicles 2 is brilliant behind the curtain, but its myriad mechanics don't always translate to fun gameplay. The battle system is the biggest offender, emphasizing long encounters rather than tactically interesting ones. Even as you earn additional allies and abilities, the game rarely challenges you to develop new strategies, allowing the rhythm of combat to grow stagnant. The big payoff assaults are cool, but even trivial encounters drag on too long, making your characters seem less powerful.

The lack of imagination in your missions is another issue. Whether they are formal sidequests or incidental tasks on a skill tree, objectives like "collect 20 pieces of wood" or "kill five crabs in this region" are constant, and often have multiple similar steps before you can claim your reward. The big exceptions to this problem are the special blades' unique quests, which are often framed by entertaining story scenes, making them some of my favorite missions to pursue.

The aggregated effect of several other problems occasionally makes the overall experience feel rushed and unpolished. This includes technical problems like sound glitches and crashes, but also an absence of basic amenities like button mapping, a useful map, and multiple save slots. Plus, you need to use your gold to buy simple tutorial refreshers, since they are not archived for your reference – a move that seems especially ridiculous given the depth and scope of the game.

Xenoblade Chronicles 2 is a sprawling RPG with numerous interconnected pieces, so no part of the experience is isolated. It takes about 100 hours to finish, and not all of that time feels well spent, with bloated quests and repetitive combat. On the other hand, the vast world and intricate upgrades are a joy to dive into. Everything evens out in the end, but the wild swings between its highs and lows make it impossible for Xenoblade Chronicles 2 to maintain altitude above its peers. » **Joe Juba**

7.5

Switch

» **Concept**
Epic in scope but average in execution, Xenoblade Chronicles 2 brings a traditional RPG experience to Switch

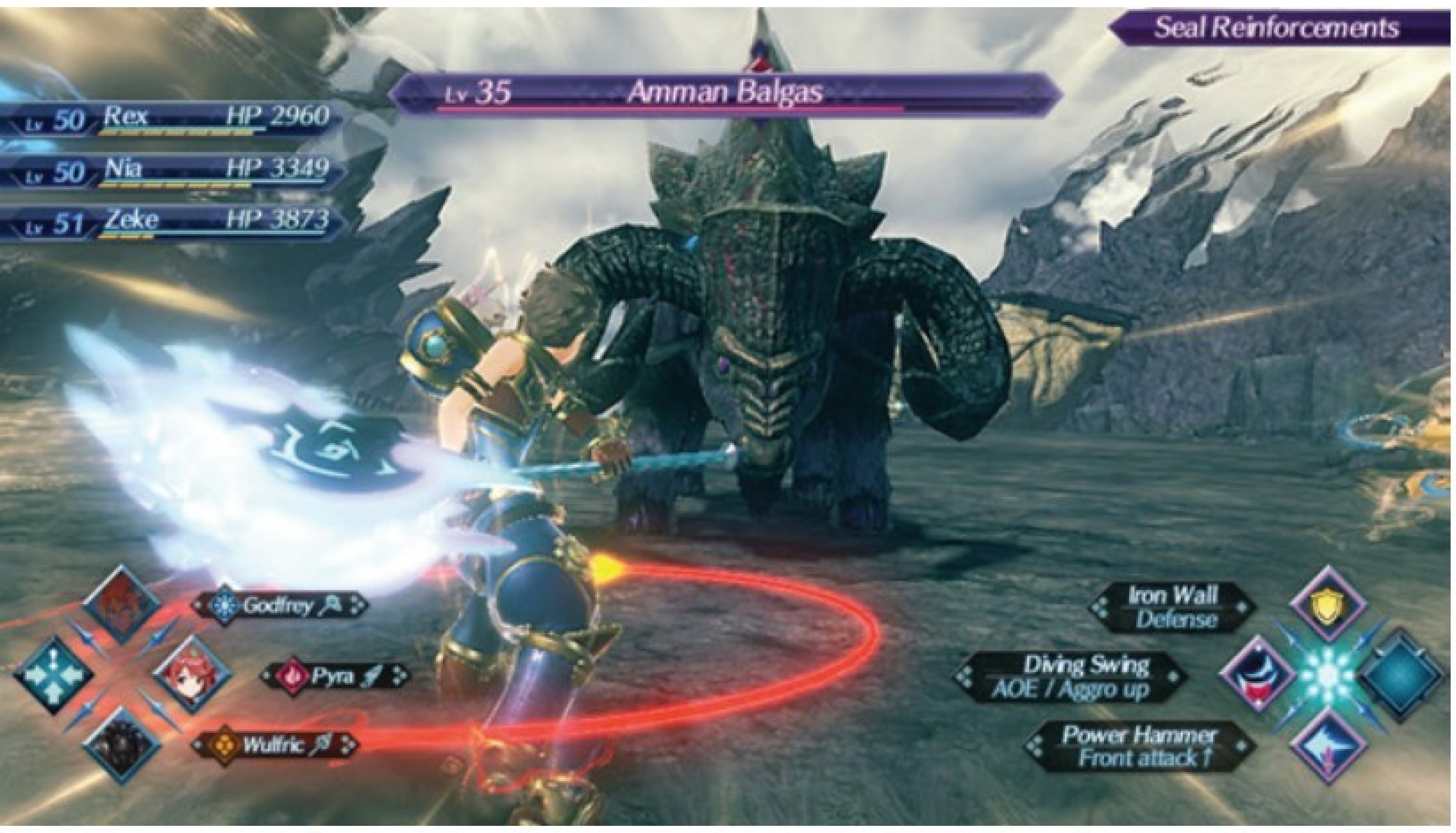
» **Graphics**
Splendid environments create a jaw-dropping world, but the character models (and wonky lip-synching) can make the cast feel wooden

» **Sound**
The Nopon are as irritating as ever, but most of the voice performances are well done. The musical score is especially good

» **Playability**
Most of the gameplay works smoothly, though the menus can be surprisingly inconvenient considering how much time you need to spend in them

» **Entertainment**
Amassing an army of allies and managing your progression is a blast, giving you enough incentive to keep going through the less compelling parts

» **Replay Value**
Moderate



6 Reigns: Her Majesty

Platform iOS, Android, PC **Release** December 7 **Rating** 12+

Her Majesty has a couple of interesting moments but largely follows the formula of the first game and fails to evolve into something special. – Ben Reeves

5 Planet Of The Apes: Last Frontier

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC **Release** November 21 **Rating** M

Last Frontier is an interesting take on the film world that trades in the same themes of the struggle between compassion and forgiveness versus the appeal of tyranny and vengeance. It's a shame that the interactive elements and choices have about as much effect on that world as the close-door button in an elevator. – Jeff Cork

7.75 Guardians Of The Galaxy – Episode Five: Don't Stop Believin'

Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC, iOS, Android
Release November 7 **Rating** T

The action may be lackluster, and the path through the story may not be filled with surprises, but I cared how it all shook out for this mismatched squad of heroes. That's more than I can say for a lot of video game characters. – Matt Miller

8.25 The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild – The Champions' Ballad

Platform Switch **Release** December 7 **Rating** E

Despite the unfortunate boss retreads and disappointing final dungeon, The Champion's Ballad is a great excuse to revisit Breath of the Wild's enormous world. – Suriel Vazquez

3.75 Hello Neighbor

Platform Xbox One, PC
Release December 8 **Rating** E10+

Hello Neighbor is unpolished to the point that it feels unfinished. The game falls so short of its genre companions that it's hard to recommend to anyone, in spite of its beautiful aesthetic. – Javy Gwaltney

5 DOOM VFR

Platform PSVR, Vive
Release November 20 **Rating** M

As a huge fan of Doom and someone interested in the possibilities of virtual reality, I came away from VFR immensely disappointed. Outside of some nifty moments involving the slow-motion mechanic, VFR just isn't compelling. – Javy Gwaltney

8 A Hat In Time

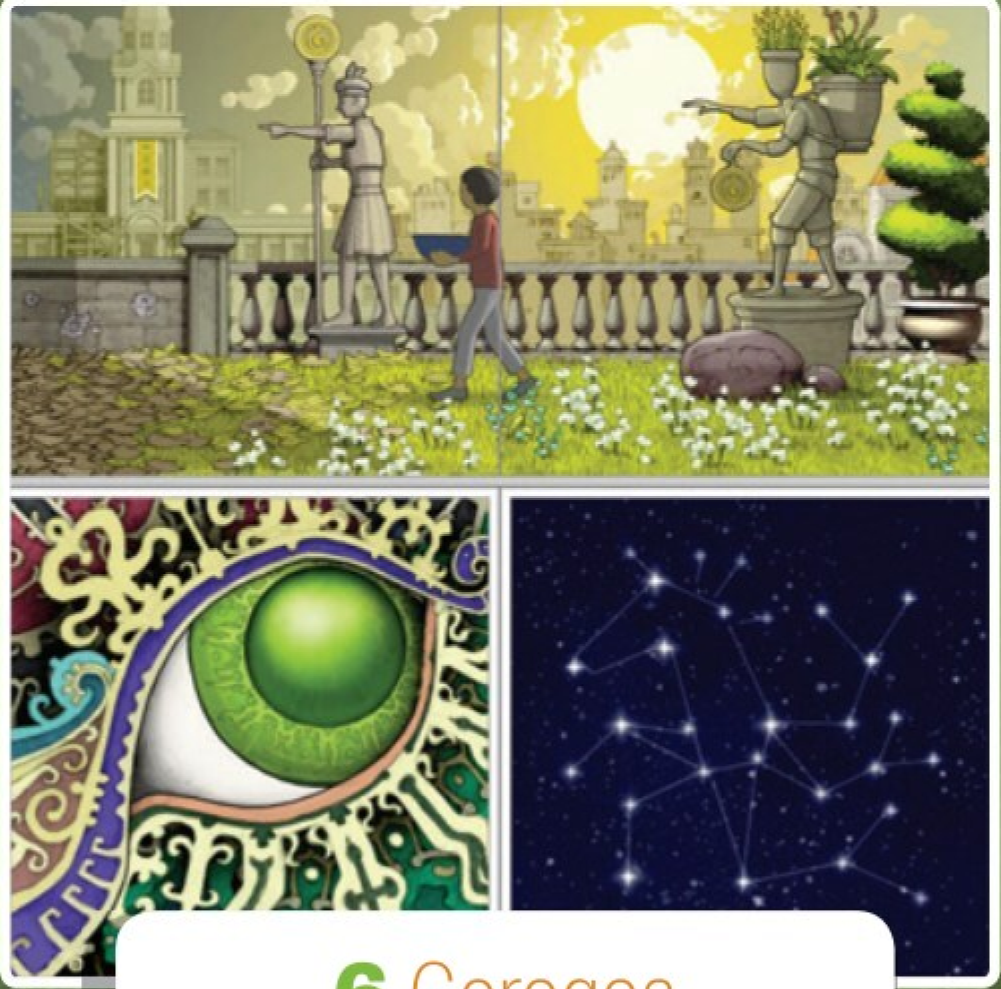
Platform PS4, Xbox One, PC, iOS, Android
Release December 7 **Rating** E10+

A Hat in Time lacks polish, but it makes up for its shortcomings with excellent platforming and an interesting universe. The experience is adorable, and in many ways, it improves on the very platformers it uses as inspiration. – Kyle Hilliard

6 Black Mirror

Platform Xbox One, PC **Release** November 28 **Rating** M

Black Mirror's story falls flat, its characters are forgettable, and exploration is tedious because of poor environmental design and wonky camera angles. Despite a few clever puzzles, this emotionless journey into gothic horror left me with more questions than answers. – Elise Favis



6 Gorogoa

Platform PC, iOS **Release** December 14
Rating N/A

Buried Signal clearly had a vision with this game and I applaud them for making it a reality. But I struggle to recommend this experience, because whatever emotions Gorogoa was hoping to convey, I simply did not feel them. – Kyle Hilliard

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The Top 50 Games Of 2017

By The Numbers

To see how trends have evolved in the video game space, we've outlined a statistical breakdown of the games that appear on our 2017 Top 50. The numbers in parenthesis represent the changes over the last year.

Legend

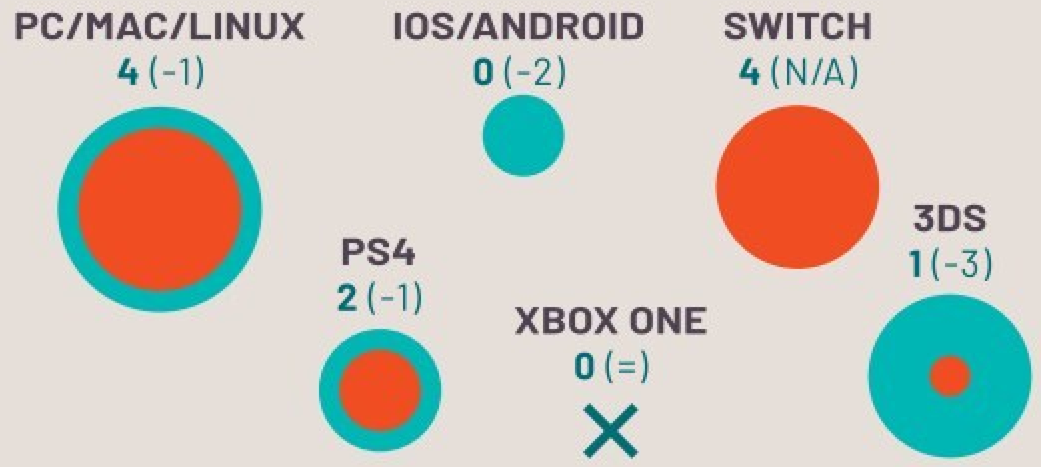
2016

2017

NEW 16 (-3)

RETURNING 34 (+3)

Series On The List



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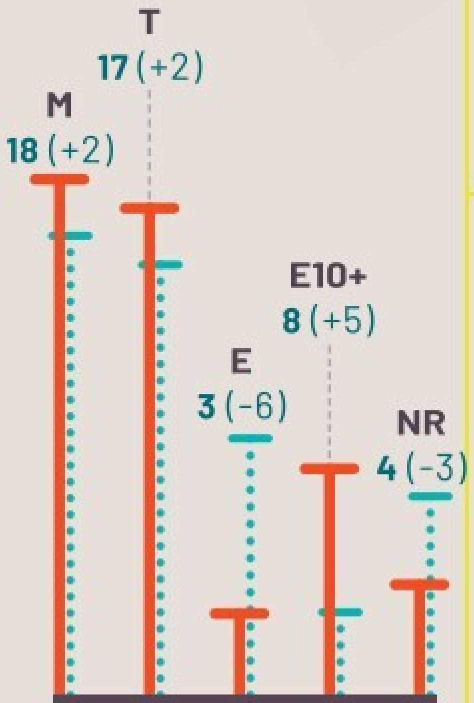

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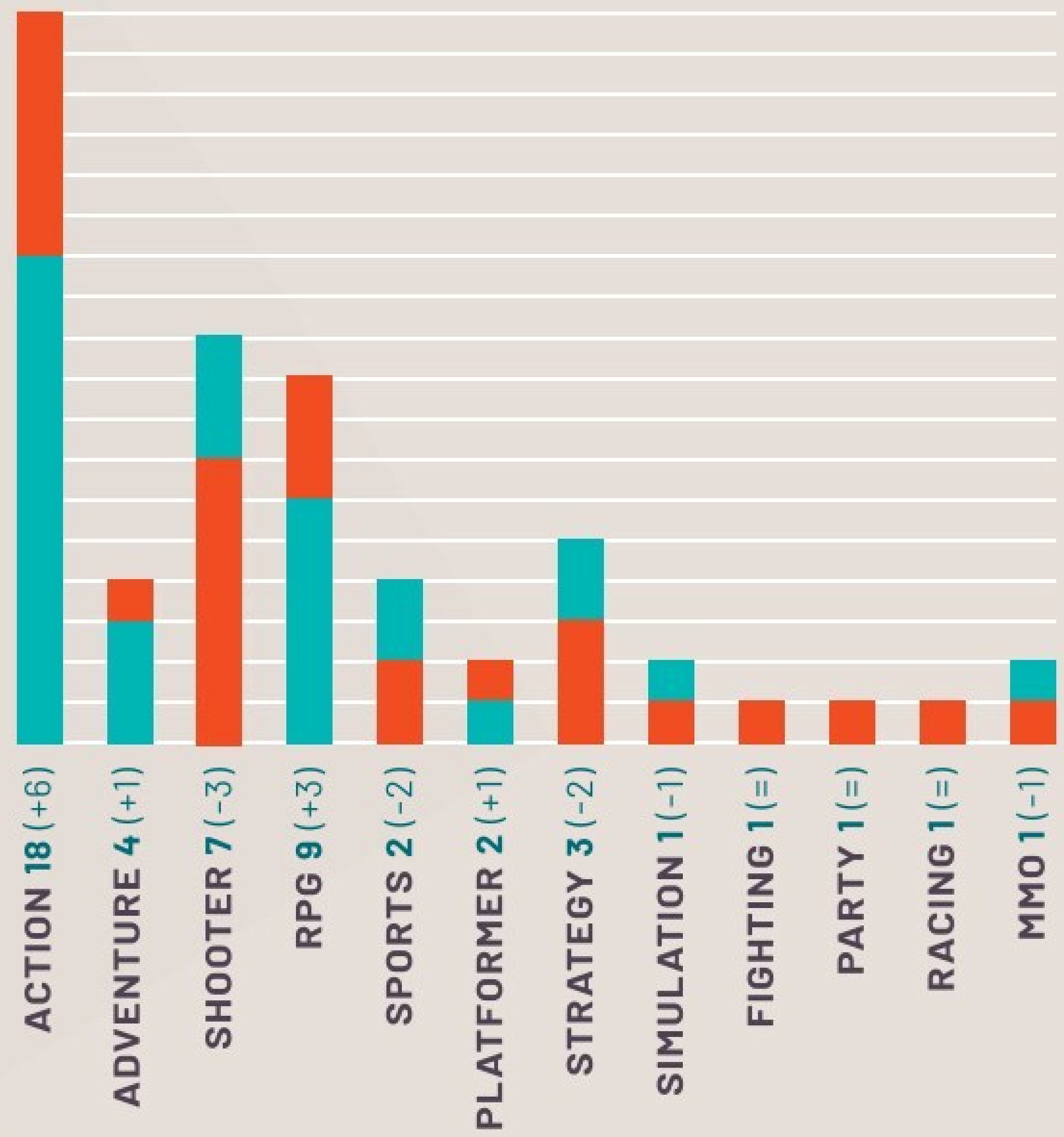

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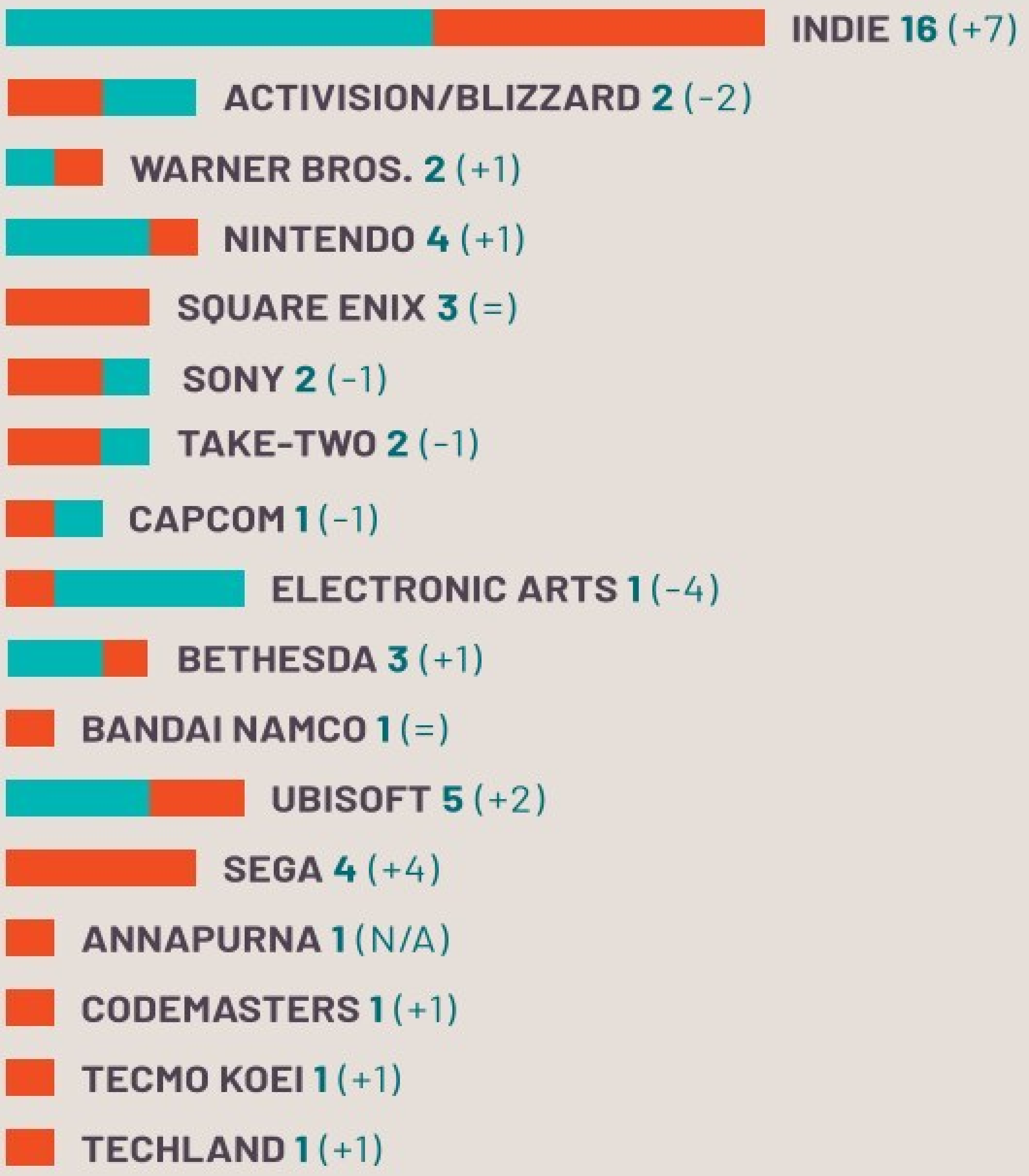
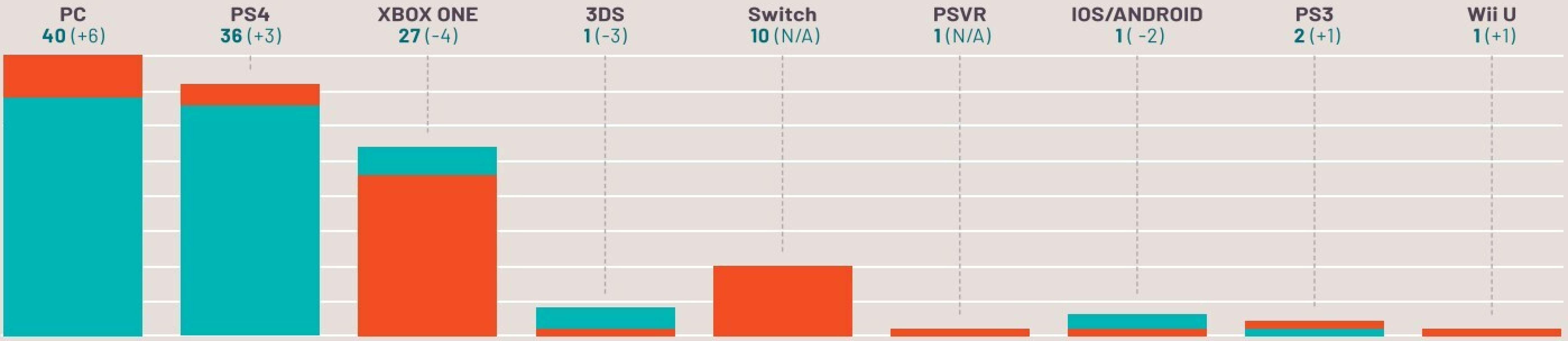


Totals By Publisher



Totals By Platform

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